

Not Servants, Friends

Jesus' words to us today from John put me in mind of a question: What is *friendship*?

Facebook uses the term *friends* to describe the connections we have on that platform. Sometimes I think *acquaintances* might be a more accurate description. A friend of mine wrote this to me recently:

"I have ambivalent feelings toward Facebook. On one hand, I get sucked into it often, but then also recognize that offers a rather false sense of connectivity with others, with limited capacity for any actual dialogue."

Isn't it the truth?

Our sound-bytes seem to be getting shorter and shorter. Our connections to one another are characterized by terse communications, letters sometimes representing words: lol. brb. ttyl. omg.

Good conversation does seem to be a dying art.

But if connections are truly harder and harder to find and sustain, it leaves me wondering what friendship really is?

If Jesus says we are to be his friends, we need to know what that means.

It is interesting what Aristotle said about friendship. "A friend to all," he said, "is a friend to none." In his *Ethics*, he claims there are three kinds of friendship: friendship based on utility, friendship based on pleasure, and friendship based on goodness of character, and what we believe about each of these shapes who we are. The first two are superficial, but he says the latter, is *essential*.

When Jesus speaks of friendship and calls his disciples friends, he has a different metric; a different marker of friendship. When Jesus speaks of friendship, he speaks of love, a rather more grand concept, to be sure, but one also much harder to live with.

Let me share a quote I read this past week:

"The legend of Eusebius has it that John in his old age had no other theme but love. From the rest of us, the speech of the fourth Gospel can descend to the level of a cliché fairly soon. The Johannine flow, so like a Moebius band without beginning or end, can tire the mind – even as it comes from the pen of its creator. As paraphrased by a lesser expositor, it can be unbearable."¹

¹ Gerard Sloyan. *John* in *Interpretation*. (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1988) p178

Love as the basis for friendship can indeed be vague, and there is a lot of *love* language in John's writings!

At times, it can be so grand and large as to leave nothing concrete with which to work. The demands of love are great, and at times vague and unending, and so the ability to achieve what love calls for can indeed "tire the mind and become unbearable."

It is useful to remember that this passage falls in lengthy teaching discourse. So often in John, the language becomes metaphorical and even allegorical. You know what I mean: sheep, wolves, hired hands... But in this instance, Jesus does not leave the allegory open for our interpretation, but rather, quickly defines his terms. He is very clear what the love of one friend for another looks like.

"Greater love," he says, "has no one but to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus's definition of love is mixed news for us, though. I mightily grateful for the one part, where he loves us even to death, that's the Christian's source of joy – that Jesus would indeed lay down his life for us, for the salvation of the world. That's wonderful news.

But then, having defined his terms, he insists on calling *us* friends.

If we're clear-eyed about the disciples, they are noteworthy for their *lack* of loveliness at times.

They weren't bad people; they certainly weren't any less lovely than we are, but neither were they *more* loveable. If scripture is to be believed, they were as ordinary as we are.

There's nothing in the Gospel to indicate that they were particularly deserving of love. And yet Jesus loves them.

Jesus is the one who starts the friendship, with no basis whatsoever in merit, and the emulation of him is the expectation of being his friends.

In other words, if we are Jesus's friends, it means we are expected to love the way he loved.

I might find it easier to be servant, to be perfectly honest.

Years ago, I was leading a discussion group, and we began listing the ways that are available to us to love like Jesus loved.

It was an interesting exercise and perhaps one I should recommend to you: take a few minutes this week, just turn off your television, turn off your devices, switch off your radio – this is already starting to feel like a vacation - leave your phone in the other room, and take a blank sheet of paper and write down what, in the absence of laying down your life, *loving like Jesus*, would look like.

Of course, the obvious point we then you have to *do* it.

Anyway, this book group and I engaged in this exercise in theoretical loving, and the results were remarkable. The group started listing things and it wasn't long before they sounded a lot like Jesus, saying things like, "pray for your enemies."

That was a big one, because it wasn't so long after some atrocities against Americans abroad when they said that. They liked it because they needed something to do in response to terrible things.

Or "take supper to a sick friend and stay with them." That's much like "give us this day our daily bread." Again, it was a huge hit. People liked the idea of helping a friend who was having a hard time.

And then they came up with this one, "Sit quietly and listen to a boring person."

That was when my friend Jane blurted out her timeless poetry, "Look, I just want to get into heaven, I'm not going for sainthood."

Really, servanthood *is* easier. Can't we just stick with that?

It demands so much less of us!

It is easy to talk about being Jesus's servants.

And certainly, the Bible does just that, we speak of being servants of the servant, the one who came to serve, to make God's love for us known yet again, in a way we could understand. There's plenty of servant language in the Bible.

But yet here is that friendship language, friendship defined by love.

Friendship defined by love, if we are to be Jesus' friends, is a life based in emulation of Jesus.

Our closing hymn today sings its way through the life of Jesus and certainly it is a difficult life to emulate: it is easy enough when we are dancing in the morning, but when the sky turns black it gets a lot harder to dance. And yet the refrain insists that we share God's love as the experience of joy – that indeed we *dance* with it!

Jack Gilbert writes poetically,

"If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down,

we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.

We must admit there will be music despite everything."²

Isn't that wonderful, *music despite everything*?

² Jack Gilbert. *A Brief for the Defense* in Refusing Heaven

The experience of joy, if it is not merely giddy happiness, is fundamentally the experience of *trust*. Only in the trust of God's love can we experience joy.

Only in the trust of God's love dare we to emulate Christ.

You know that is the great challenge for us to be friends, *that we must emulate Christ*.

It's so much more than clicking "like" or "unlike" or "friend" or "unfriend" or remembering to wish someone a happy anniversary.

Love is both the definition and the call of Christian community.

I suppose that is akin to being run down by the locomotive of the Lord.

Basically, to steal a line from Paul, we die to the old and are born to the new.

It means that something *changes* within us when Jesus invites us into friendship with him.

There was a time when we fretted more about our relationships. Perhaps I'm wrong but it seems easier now simply to live and let live. I know I do. Some days it's the best we can muster.

But the emulation of Christ demands *sainthood* from me, and from you.

In Thomas a Kempis's classic, Of the Imitation of Christ, he admonishes us, "Without a friend thou canst not well live; and if Jesus be not above all a friend to thee, thou shalt indeed be sad and desolate."

I was particularly struck by the next part, "Thou actest, therefore, like an idiot, if thou trust or rejoice in any other."³

There was indeed a time when Christians would turn aside from the communion rail if we had any grudge or error outstanding against another. The Apostle Paul admonished us to go from the table, make amends, and then return together, community restored.

Friendship with Christ, we read, is the source of great joy. That is what we receive in community, and that is what we share with one another. That's why church membership isn't like joining a Cricket Club or Rotary. We make commitments to one another: commitments that we are going to walk alongside each other, because Jesus walks alongside us.

Love requires more than good feelings. Love requires courage.

Not just the courage of someone under fire who defies fear to act without interest to safety, but *moral* courage.

What is the moral courage required for friendship?

Tom Long tells it this way,

³ Thomas a Kempis. Of the Imitation of Christ (Oxford University Press, London 1943) p75

“I once met a Presbyterian woman in the coal country of Pennsylvania who had made the social misstep of becoming engaged to a Catholic in the early 1930s, a time of hardened Protestant boundaries. Her community turned its back on her. Conversations ended when she approached people. She would never forget, she said, the Sunday when a respected woman in her congregation, in bold defiance of prevailing attitudes, publicly embraced her and wished ‘every blessing of God’ on her and her marriage. It was a small act of courage, but one cherished nearly 60 years later.”⁴

I cannot say for you what will be required in the course of your friendship with Jesus.

It may at times be easier to remain a servant.

I don’t know whether you will be asked to lay down your life for your friends. It seems unlikely under most circumstances.

Most of the time, it’s so *easy* to be a Christian – I know I’ve shared one of my favorite New Yorker Cartoons with you... where a bespectacled plutocrat and his bejeweled, fur wearing wife are shaking hands with the pastor, and as they step into their limousine, and she remarks, “You know, it can’t be easy for him not to offend us.”

I just want to get in; I’m not going for sainthood.

Perhaps we don’t ask enough of each other. Perhaps you want more?

Perhaps what you hunger for isn’t *servanthood* but *friendship*?

Perhaps the ease of clicking on a worship link, which has become the equivalent of sliding into church on Sunday morning and sliding back out just as easily, feels a little formulaic some days – the music and the sermon perhaps move you, but something is missing?

Jesus knew that worship without action won’t feed us spiritually for very long.

Jesus needs folks with moral courage.

The dance of faith calls for moral courage, the imitation of Christ, eschewing worship without discipleship... those can be a lot of dance steps to keep straight.

Thankfully, we’re not the ones leading.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁴ Thomas G. Long. *Small Acts of Courage in The Christian Century*. May 2, 2012. P47