

John 15:9-17 ~ Acts 10:44-48

Will You Be My Friend?

6th Sunday of Easter ~ Mother's Day ~ May 9, 2021

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Who do you call friend? Think for a moment, and name that person, or persons to yourselves. As Marlene Dietrich once said, "It's the ones you can call at 4:00 am that matter." Who can you call at 4:00 a.m.? We need that kind of friend. People we can call early or late. People who know what we are feeling and thinking, even before say anything. People who we do get mad at or hurt by, and then we find our way back. Often at a deeper level than before. And yes, our friends are the ones who keep us from doing stupid things. Or at least they try to. They know us, and they still like us! These are the friends we can pick up with right where we left off-- even if we haven't been in touch for months or years.

We need friends. It seems as though God may have, too. If you read between the lines of our two creation stories in Genesis, why do you suppose God would create humans in God's image in Genesis 1:26? Or create Adam out of the dirt, put him in the garden of Eden and then observe, "It is not good that the man should be alone." And along came Eve. Next we hear God, Adam and Eve palming around in the garden with a little "hide and go seek." And the rest is history (well starting with Abraham). Perhaps God was lonely, in a divine sort of way. If not, why create us at all?

When Jesus came to us in human form, the first thing he did after his forty days in the wilderness was to make friends. He formed a friend group. The very group of twelve friends to whom he was speaking in today's gospel lesson. But now he is about to die and he is telling them the most important truth of all. Truth that would perhaps reframe how they understood their relationship with the one they called Rabbi, Master, Lord, Teacher, Messiah. Now, friend?

Friendship with God was not a brand-new concept to the ears of Jesus' disciples. Abraham, Moses and Miriam were friends with God. So were prophets and luminaries of the first Testament: Ruth, Naomi, Esther, David and Jonathan. Those folks were more than servants. Even all the way back in Genesis 18, Abraham has a long conversation with God that changes God's mind about what he might do about the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah. In Exodus 33, we are told that, "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend." But here in his farewell discourse, Jesus is extending this mutual bond of friendship to *everyone* in the room. Regular knuckleheads who were not patriarchs or prophets, but common fishermen, even a tax collector. It was to these very disciples whom he knew would betray him, deny him, and abandon him in a matter of hours, Jesus said, "You are my friends."

And there's just one rule, one commandment, one underlying basis for this friendship according to Jesus. It doesn't have to do with what family you are born into, or where you are from, or what you have done or what has been done to you. It's all about LOVE. Inborn, unshakeable. At the core of every human being on this earth. You may be wondering, but doesn't Jesus put in a qualifies here, "You are my friends *if* you do what I command you?" Not

conditional, but contingent. “Friendship is contingent on love, if we reach out in love, we are friends with God and one another.”ⁱ Love, as we all recognize, doesn’t mean we never mess up. Take Judas, Peter, and all the disciples who fled Jesus in his hour of being bullied and mocked and left to die. Right when he really needed a friend most. And still, the Risen Christ came to them in the Upper Room, not once, but twice. Still friend Jesus cooked breakfast for them on the beach and had a heart-to-heart with Peter, who had denied him three times, to reconcile. To restore friendship. You can certainly feel Peter’s guilt and anguish, and we can guess there was hurt in both hearts.

We can see plainly see in these stories: to love one another as Jesus loves us, to befriend one another, as Jesus befriends us, does not inoculate us against pain. Far from it. Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*, in his chapter titled, “Feeling No Pain, Feeling No Joy,” he wrote:

When I protect myself against the danger of loss (by death, divorce, or just having a close friend move away)—by teaching myself not to care—not to let anyone get too close to me, I lose part of my soul. When I try to avoid pain by skipping the articles about famine and torture in the papers, and turning to the sports pages and gossip columns, saying to myself, “It’s too bad, but that’s the way the world is,”—I let myself become less human, less alive. To be alive is to feel pain, and to hide from pain is to make yourself less alive.”

“We can choose not to love Jesus, and not to love people—but if we do, we choose another kind of pain—the pain of loneliness. Either way, we experience pain. But the pain of love is humanizing. And the pain of isolation or indifference is dehumanizing. Jesus invites us to experience the humanizing pain that comes with loving others. We can’t love another person if we don’t enter into their pain.”ⁱⁱ

In this text, Jesus is inviting us into a safe space to experience this pain when he says, “Abide in my love” John 15:9. As Rev. Dr. Sally Howard has expressed the healing work that happens when we abide in Christ, “God desires closeness to all our experience, naked and raw, in its particularity and commonality. By providing the safe dwelling place, God defeats the horror in our lives. God catches up our trauma and waves any horror-filled participation into an unending relationship of beatific intimacy. When we recognize God in our own narrative, there is no wound so deep that God cannot heal.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This truth may give us the basis from which we are free to expand our definition of “friend.” We may be astounded by the diversity of God’s friend group. God’s pod, if you will. Jesus keeps trying to tell us: God chooses everyone. God so loved *the world*. Yup, even the Gentiles, as our friends of Peter’s in our first lesson were astounded to discover. Even after Peter’s encounter with two Gentile outsiders (as they initially perceived them): Cornelius of the Italian cohort, and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Surprising encounters in which Peter learned that even these two were befriended by Jesus: a European Gentile foreigner and an African non cisgendered person. Even still, were heard how the Holy Spirit interrupted Peter mid-sermon with the Gentiles speaking in tongues and extolling God out loud. Yup, these people too, Peter. They are my friends, I chose them, just like I chose you. You can, you must, be their friends too.

That is my commandment. It's a hard one. Especially with people we don't know, don't understand, or who are different from us.

Sometimes children find it easier to befriend "the other" than we grownups do. Children like an eight-year-old named Christian Moore on the first day of second grade. You may have seen the video that captured Conner and Christian, on their first day of school back on August 26, 2019, in Wichita, Kansas (where I lived as a teenager). You see Conner, who is on the Autism spectrum, walking toward the school from the bus along with lots of other children heading for the entrance, and he freezes and starts to cry, unable to keep moving forward. At that terrifying moment for Conner, another eight-year-old boy named Christian Moore, goes over to comfort him, takes him by the hand and leads him into the building. "He found me and held my hand, and I got happy tears," Conner later told a reporter. "He was kind to me. I was in my first day of school, and I started crying. Then he helped me, and I was happy."

They have since become fast friends. Conner's mom said that Christian is Conner's real first friend. What the video would show you is a white boy, Conner, frozen in fear and a black boy, Christian, reaching out, taking his hand and with that gesture alone, befriend him. Take a look at this video, through this young boy whose name is "Christian" we see what Jesus is saying to us, "You are my friend whom I have chosen, walk with me. We are together. And you are not alone."^{iv}

Sometimes we are Conner, desperately needing a friend to reach out their hand to help unfreeze us and let us know we are not alone. But I hear Christ calling us to aspire to be Christian, to be the one who extends friendship. Even with others who don't look like us, talk like us, or act like us. To do this, to be like the eight-year-old boy named Christian, we must slow down, take notice, and not take anything for granted. I am inspired by Christian, because I know how often I rush from place to place, way too full of purpose and schedule to even notice the one in the crowd who is feeling lost or lonely.

Sometimes the stranger who takes us by the hand when we are paralyzed by fear isn't eight years old, but eighty years old. Jim Brown seemed that old to Bob and me, who were 25 years old when Jim pulled up to the bar outside Crescent City, California on one of the worst nights of our lives. You see we were just seven days in on a cross country bicycle tour to Canada. We had ridden 82 miles that day, from Eureka, California up the coast to Crescent City, just turning into Del Norte State Park to camp for the night, when a Sheriff in a pick-up truck stopped on the road and told us that we had an emergency message to call Fran Davis. Being 1982, we had to ride another six miles back into town to find a payphone booth, which we did at this bar. When we finally reached Fran, we discovered that Bob's dad had died instantly of an aneurysm that had gone to his heart. Disbelief and panic set into both of us. We were frozen, paralyzed not believing what we had heard. Not knowing what to do next.

Thankfully my "mother in love" Fran had thought to randomly call the only Presbyterian pastor in Eureka to see if he could be of some assistance. By the time he drove the almost two hours along the coast it was close to 11 pm, when he found us at this bar. From there he drove

us to his home, put us up for the night, and took us to the airport so we could fly home to the Bay Area where Bob's family was. Rev. Jim Brown also met us at the bus station a week later and took us to his friend's funeral home in town, where he had stored our bikes and gear for us, so we could continue our trip. We never saw him again. But that friendship was a holy one that changed us forever.

Who has taken you by the hand in your hour of panic? Was it the person who came to mind when I asked you at the beginning of this sermon who you call friend? This might be a good day to thank that person, let them know how much they mean to you. And if they are deceased, let their child or family member know.

What about your friendship with Jesus? Has it been a while since you reconnected with Jesus? The Risen Christ is still your friend no matter how long it's been: ready to be there for you, to go the distance and/or the depth you need right now. And Jesus has promised us: it is your joy that will be complete when you fulfill Jesus' command to befriend others as we have been befriended. We can do this, we must do this, because of Jesus. Our savior and friend.

ⁱ Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Lord, Savior, and Presence*, (HarperOne: San Francisco, CA, 2020), Chapter 1.

ⁱⁱ Wayne McLaughlin, *The Three Pigs of Jesus: Reflections on Faith, Tolerance, and Love*, (iUniverse: Lincoln, Nebraska, 2006), pp. 27 and 144.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rev. Dr. Sally Howard, as quoted May 4, 2021, by Richard Rohr in his Center for Action & Contemplation daily reading, from her article :“Secure Dwelling and Positive Meaning in the Face of Trauma.”

^{iv} Ibid, Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, p. 29.