

John 15:9-17

Jesus calls us his friends

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.

Throughout last year as we socially distanced and had periods of lockdown and isolation, a few started asking questions about the nature of true friendship. Can you truly maintain a friendship without ever spending time in the same physical space? And how many of the people that we might call friends actually fit the definition? Back in the early 90s, anthropologist Robin Dunbar came to the conclusion that most people are able to maintain some level of connected relationship with about 150 people. If we narrow that to just our true close friends, the sort of people we can confide in, and share all the ups and downs of life with, that number comes down to about five.

These are the ones for whom you might be willing to lay down your life. You might be happy to help the 150 in some token way, but only those five or so close true friends would be worthy of the sacrifice. And it's this level of relationship that Jesus is talking about in today's gospel reading. He says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." And then he says you are my friends.

Do you get the connection? Remember, we are still in the season of Easter. The greatest act of love is to lay down your life for your friends. And that's exactly what Jesus did. He was indeed willing to lay down his life for his friends, and we make that list. And Jesus, being the eternal Son of God, can manage more than just five.

He calls his disciples 'friends' to teach them an important truth. Although being almighty God and Lord, this is not what defines our relationship with him. He says we're not like slaves, who don't know the master's business. A slave or servant is simply expected to do what he is told without understanding why. The servant doesn't know and doesn't need to know. But Jesus reveals to his disciples the reason why, he proclaims the purpose, reveals his true nature to them. The scriptures still use the language of servant, in that we willingly and humbly serve and obey God. But here, Jesus called His disciples friends because he had disclosed his Father's revelation to them. They now knew the business of the master, and so were counted as friends.

In this passage, Jesus also reminded them that contrary to the common practice of disciples picking a teacher to follow, Jesus had chosen them. And the purpose of this choosing was so that they would produce good fruit. We heard that last week in the vine and the branches reading. And he chose them for a mission, and the Father would answer their requests in order to accomplish that mission.

So, Jesus does the choosing and appointing. And for those of us who wish to abide in his love, this is surely good news. We do not have to carve out a position as Jesus' friend or as a branch on his vine. Our bearing of good fruit, of loving one another, does not depend on us. We might not even be able to imagine precisely what it will all look like since we aren't the ones doing the pruning and we can only see our part of the vine. Those who are connected to Jesus, who abide in him, do bear good fruit, and this only happens because they are connected to the vine and pruned by the gardener. Those who are connected to Jesus are no longer slaves, but friends, not on the basis of anything that they have done for him, but on the basis of what he has done for them.

These two passages really need to be read as one. Only then do we get the full picture. Jesus is saying here two things: he is the disciples' friend and thus he is willing to give his life for them, and yet he is not his disciples' equal. He retains a unique position as the eternal Son of God, but he has brought them into a relationship of true godly love, a community of friends, willing to sacrifice themselves for each other. And Jesus models for this community what this loving self-sacrificial relationship looks like. It is based on obedience to God's commandments and on self-giving. In the same way that Jesus kept God's commands and abides in God's love, so also the disciples, if they keep Jesus' commands, will abide in his love. That is, they will remain attached to Jesus and through Jesus to the Father. And this love is best expressed as self-giving, self-sacrificing love, in laying down one's life for your friends.

Another implication of this is how we understand the full meaning of Jesus' death. We do correctly say that Jesus died to pay the price for our sin. But here the emphasis is on Jesus proving God's love toward humanity. This is something that we especially find in John's gospel. John is the one who tells us that Jesus washed the disciples' feet at the last supper, and tells us very little about the institution of Holy Communion that same night. Jesus demonstrates love in his life and demonstrates love in his death. His death was love taken to its most extreme and radical manifestation. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

So, when the scriptures call us to love one another, which they most certainly do, we are definitely not left to our own devices to figure out what this looks like. The love God showed toward Jesus he showed toward his disciples so they could show it to each other. And this love is not just an emotion or feeling, but a conscious decision to put yourself on the line and risk everything for the other. It's not some hidden internal quality, but an action, a really difficult action. A willingness to die for a friend, for another of Jesus' disciples, another branch in the vine.

I suspect that's not what immediately comes to mind when we hear bible readings about loving one another. But that is what Jesus calls us to here. The love that we are called to live is one that gives up our own life, puts aside our wants, our desires, our apparent rights, and serves the neighbour in need. This is what Jesus did. This is what Jesus' friends are called to do.

It is not easy. The only one who could do this perfectly and without fault is Jesus, the Word made flesh, the eternal Son of God, who calls us all his friends. But we are branches on the vine. We are connected to him, united with him, and with his love growing in us and through, we will find ourselves laying down our lives also. And when we do, may we praise God for all his goodness to us, that we might imitate Jesus and show his love to a world in need. This is our great calling and great honour as Jesus' friends. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.