

What a Jesus We Have In Friends

John 15:12-17

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

If you've ever spent any time in Texas, you know that Texans have a pretty exalted opinion of their state.

Everything in Texas—

from ten-gallon hats

to porterhouse steaks

to A.T. & T. stadium where the Dallas Cowboys play—

is bigger and better than anywhere else...

at least in the view of most Texans.

This attitude was on display some years ago when the Texas Highway Commission proposed a new slogan for its license plates—

“The Friendship State.”

The result was an outpouring of criticism and complaint.

People felt that it was too weak and wimpy a slogan,

and something like “Don't Mess With Texas” would be better.

A newspaper in Austin conducted a poll of what should go on the license plates.

Out of 7,636 ballots, 6,515 said “The Lone Star State.”

Only 121 wanted “The Friendship State.”

Other suggestions included “The Bank Failure State,” “The Insolvent State,” “Pinhead Legislature,” and “Texas: Gateway to Oklahoma.”

But here is the thing that troubles me:

When did friendship become weak or wimpy?

II

In today’s gospel lesson we find a remarkable saying from Jesus:

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.”

Not only is this a great text for the 6th Sunday of Easter,
it is also a great text for Mother’s Day.

Who is more dedicated and devoted to laying down one’s life for one’s family and friends than one’s mother?

At least the founder of Mother’s Day, Anna Jarvis, thought so.

Her mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis, was not only a devoted and loving mother, but also quite an activist in the town of Webster, West Virginia and the surrounding towns of Grafton, Fetterman, Puntytown, and Philippi.

Ann Reeves Jarvis organized Mothers’ Day Work Clubs to serve the needs of the down-and-out.

During the Civil War she led efforts to treat, feed, and house wounded veterans of both sides.

She worked for peace and harmony in a community being torn apart by political differences.

After the Civil War, Ann Reeves Jarvis organized Mothers' Friendship Days to help heal the divisions from the war.

She worked tirelessly despite the personal tragedy of losing four of her children to disease. In all, eight of her twelve children died before reaching adulthood.

Ann Reeves Jarvis lived in the spirit of the words of Jesus:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Now I ask you, what is weak or wimpy about that?

III

Sam Keen in his book The Passionate Life wrote that we are living in "the dark ages of friendship."

Friendship is above all a relationship of **intimacy**: close, personal, deep.

Pursuing romance is easy.

The pursuit of intimacy is never easy.

It requires effort that few are willing to make.

Too many people go through life without having an intimate relationship with anyone—

not with a parent,

not with a sibling,

not even with their spouse.

Sam Keen writes:

Friendship exists as a sanctuary that is situated between the private world of the family, the ambiguities of sexual love, and the public world...Friendship is a sanctuary precisely because within it we may be more than, and different from, the destiny we must wrestle with in the family or the roles we must assume to enter the contractual order of civility. With my friends I am neither [parent], nor merchant, nor citizen. I am uniquely myself.

He goes on:

The value of friendship lies in its exemption from the rules of usefulness...with my friend I may share my asocial, heretical, treasonous, antisocial, tabooed, or outrageous ideas, visions, and feelings.

In short, with a friend I can be who I am, no more and no less.

Do you have a friend like that?

I do; we were in the same 8th grade class, and he too is an ordained minister.

Bruce knows more about my life than every other person, except for my wife.

Friendship is the greatest gift we can give to another person and receive from another person.

Understanding...

acceptance...

love...

caring...

these are the benchmarks of relationships that go beyond casual acquaintance.

A friend is someone who understands you better than anyone else;

someone who knows the worst about you and still stands by you and cares.

A friend is someone you can count on no matter what may happen;

who freely open his or her heart and reveals its depths to you.

Henri Nouwen writes:

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

A true friend will stand by you when no one else will.

When Pepper Rogers was head coach of the UCLA football team, he was suffering through a terrible losing season with the team.

It got so bad it even upset his home life.

Coach Rogers recalled, "My dog was my only friend. I told my wife that a man needs at least two friends, and she bought me another dog,"

It is not too strong a statement to say that...

Friendship is the most important relationship that can exist between two human beings.

And it is only friendship that can meet our deepest needs for intimacy.

Mark Twain said,

The holy passion of friendship is of so sweet and steady and loyal and enduring a nature that it will last through a whole lifetime if not asked to lend money!

Again to quote Sam Keen:

*“When friendship is strong enough, we need little else—
besides bread and shelter.”*

That is anything but weak or wimpy!

IV

Earlier in John 15 Jesus calls on his followers to stay connected to him.

“Abide in me, and I in you,” he says. *“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”*

The result of abiding in Jesus is a new kind of relationship with him—
a relationship of love, intimacy, and friendship.

No longer does Jesus call his followers servants,
for servants do not know the will of their master.

Rather he calls them friends "because I have made known to you everything that I
have heard from my Father."

His sharing with them is complete.

The Jesus kind of friendship is characterized by a total self-giving love,
a love that seeks no personal gain.

Jesus shows this kind of love for his followers by dying on the cross for them.

He lays down his life and calls on his followers to do the same.

Can we be friends like that to each other?

Can we,
like Ann Reeves Jarvis,

like Jesus,
lay down our lives for each other?

True friendship has little to do with what one gets from a relationship.

True friendship has to do with what one puts into a relationship.

And here Jesus calls for a major investment—the investment of one's life.

In this passage it is like there is a pipeline of love...

flowing from God the Father to Jesus...

flowing from Jesus to the disciples...

flowing from his disciples out into the world.

As long as you and I remain connected to the source—

as long as we abide in Jesus—

the spigot is turned on full

and the supply of love is abundant.

V

And notice also that this is not a love that one can design or craft or manufacture.

This relationship of love with Jesus is not something we can choose.

Here the text is ever so clear:

this friendship exists because Jesus made it to exist.

"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."

Usually friendship has a sense of mutuality about it.

Usually there is a feeling of commonality,
an air of reciprocity.

In human experience, friends seem to choose each other.

Isn't that usually how it works?

Not so with Jesus.

"You did not choose me. I chose you..."

Jesus chose us to be his friends.

He places his followers in the enviable position they occupy.

He causes this friendship to become reality because he is the Master.

He can do that!

The disciples have no vote in the choice.

They certainly have the freedom to obey or disobey.

They have the freedom to honor or dishonor the choice.

But Jesus has chosen them.

He has chosen you and me!

Jesus is the greatest friend you will ever have!

VI

During the Vietnam War, a rural village had been bombarded with mortar shells and some shells landed on an orphanage run by missionaries.

The missionaries and a few children were killed outright.

Several other children were wounded, including an 8-year-old girl who had multiple injuries and was bleeding profusely.

In response to a runner sent to a near-by town, a young Navy doctor and nurse came with only their medical kits.

The young girl was in critical condition and in immediate need of a blood transfusion.

Blood typing indicated that neither the American doctor nor nurse had the right blood type, however, several of the uninjured children did.

The Navy doctor spoke some Vietnamese and the nurse some high school French; the children spoke no English, but some French.

Using what language they had and sign language, they tried to explain to the frightened children that unless they could replace some of the girl's blood, she was going to die.

They asked if anyone would be willing to give blood to help. Wide-eyed silence met their request. After several moments of eye-searching, a little hand went slowly up, dropped down, then went up again.

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed the nurse in French, "What is your name?"

"Haong," came the reply.

Haong was quickly laid on a pallet, his arm swabbed with alcohol, the needle carefully inserted in his vein.

After a moment he shuddered, covering his face with his free hand.

"Is it hurting, Haong?" asked the doctor.

Haong shook his head no, but he kept sobbing, his eyes tightly closed, his fist in his mouth to stifle his sobs. Something was very wrong.

Just then a Vietnamese nurse arrived to help. Seeing Haong's distress, she spoke to him in Vietnamese, listened to him, quickly answered him, stroking his forehead, soothing and reassuring him.

After a few moments, Haong stopped crying, opened his eyes, and a look of relief spread over his face.

Looking up, the Vietnamese nurse explained to the Americans,

"Haong thought he was dying. He misunderstood you. He thought you asked him to give all his blood to save the little girl."

"But why would he be willing to do that?" asked the Navy nurse.

The Vietnamese nurse repeated the question to Haong, who answered simply,
"Because she is my friend."

VII

No, my friends, friendship is not weak or wimpy,
 despite what some in Texas might think.

Learning how to make and keep friends is one of life's greatest challenges.

Being a true friend means following the example of our Lord in laying down one's life for one's friends.

As Fred Buechner writes:

To be [Jesus'] friends...we have to be each other's friends, conceivably even lay down our lives for each other....It is a high price to pay, and Jesus does not pretend otherwise, but the implication is that it's worth every cent.

I am reminded of the old gospel song:

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
 All our sins and griefs to bear;
 What a privilege to carry,
 Everything to God in prayer.*

Yes...what a friend we have in Jesus.

But it is equally true: **what a Jesus we have in friends.**

Amen.

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