



## Being God's Friends

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan  
The Sixth Sunday of Easter~May 6, 2018*

### **Acts 10:44-48**

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

### **Psalm 98**

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| 1 Sing a new song to God, *<br>who has done marvelous things.   | 6 Sing to God with the harp, *<br>with the harp and the voice of song.   |
| 2 With your right hand, O God, and your holy arm *<br>you have won for yourself the victory.  | 7 With trumpets and the sound of the horn *<br>shout with joy before God who reigns in majesty.                              |
| 3 You have made known your victory; *<br>your righteousness have you openly shown<br>in the sight of the nations.                             | 8 Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, *<br>the lands and those who dwell therein.                                |
| 4 You remember your mercy and faithfulness<br>to the house of Israel, *<br>and all the ends of the earth have seen<br>the victory of our God. | 9 Let the rivers clap their hands, *<br>and let the hills ring out with joy before God,<br>who will come to judge the earth. |
| 5 Shout with joy to God, all you lands; *<br>lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.   | 10 God shall judge the world in righteousness. *<br>and the peoples with equity.   |

### **I John 5:1-6**

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

### **John 15:9-17**

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 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, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

I do not call you servants any longer, but I have called you friends.

It's a bold thing to be called a friend of Jesus, a friend of God. Because it's a bold thing to be a friend. True friendship is one of the boldest practices, I daresay, in human life.

But we have come, in recent years, to use the word friend incredibly casually. We no longer seem to have acquaintances, really, just lots and lots of friends. We "friend" people on Facebook. We address random groups of people as "friends," feeling the impulse to feign intimacy at every turn. We seem, on the surface, to have so many friends.

But real friends can be hard to come by. Real friendship takes work, takes commitment. And most of us just don't have all that much relational energy to spare.

So we often accept a shallower version of friendship. A somewhat insubstantial and innocuous kind of friendship. We so often allow friendships to lapse, too. Or we prevent them from ever developing, always insisting on a bit of distance in our relationships.

So when Jesus calls us friends, we should be startled.

Because in many ways, we'd rather be followers than friends. We're happy to receive Jesus' teachings. And we try to enact his precepts as best we can. But when it comes down to it, we still want to be able to walk away. We don't want to get in too deep. We want to maintain a semblance of freedom.

I have some questions about this freedom, however. Because I wonder if our efforts to maintain this freedom, this autonomy, this separateness...are part of why we're so lonely.

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In a new study, reported on NPR this week...almost 50% of the 20,000 Americans surveyed reported that they feel "alone or left out" always or sometimes. 54% said they always or sometimes feel that "no one knows them well." 56% reported they sometimes or always felt like the people around them "are not necessarily with them."<sup>1</sup>

Which means that at least half of the people in this church probably feel these things, too. A whole bunch of us are lonely. Even some of us with packed social calendars. Even some of us who seem to always be surrounded by people. Even those of us who are the life of the party.

Now...don't worry. I'm not about to tell you that since Jesus wants to be your friend, you're all set in the friendship department. Far from it.

Divine friendship certainly isn't a cure-all for loneliness. But Jesus' desire to befriend us, and our reactions to this attempted befriending, do reveal a great deal about the relational predicaments in which many of us find ourselves.

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You see, there's something a little bit backwards about how Jesus does the friendship thing.

The way most of us do it, we get to know someone slowly, gradually revealing more of ourselves, bit by bit. Once we've decided that we've entered into friendship territory, then, and only then, do we begin share the more of the difficult, vulnerable, risky stuff. This is normal. This is prudent.

We don't go telling all of our secrets to just anybody. Friendship precedes disclosure. "A confidante is, by definition, someone who has earned our confidence, and it is only to such trusted or trustworthy individuals that full disclosure is made."<sup>2</sup> So, naturally, this is how we would expect anybody, including Jesus, to operate. According to this logic, then, we would have expected Jesus to speak to his disciples along these lines:

Well guys, we've been together for three years now, and during this time, I've really grown to trust you. Our friendship has become so deep and meaningful, that I feel ready to share everything that my Father has told me with you. Some of it's a bit confusing and a bit unsettling, but I know I can trust you with it.<sup>3</sup>

But in John's Gospel, Jesus doesn't do it this way, in part because his disciples "will [almost] immediately

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1 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/05/01/606588504/americans-are-a-lonely-lot-and-young-people-bear-the-heaviest-burden>

2 Fitzgerald, John T. "Christian Friendship: John, Paul, and the Philippians." Interpretation, 61 no 3 Jul 2007, p 284-296.

3 Fitzgerald, 285 (paraphrased).

demonstrate that they are utterly untrustworthy, with Peter denying him and the others [then] abandoning him.”<sup>4</sup>

Instead, Jesus reverses the standard logic, telling his disciples: "I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." "I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

Biblical scholar John Fitzgerald explains Jesus' move in this way: "Revelation here creates friendship rather than presupposes it. Jesus discloses everything to the disciples in spite of the fact that they are unreliable. Stated theologically, it is grace, rather than demonstrated merit and reliability on the disciples' part, that creates friendship between Jesus and his disciples. By treating his followers as friends, Jesus makes them precisely that.”<sup>5</sup>

Now, I think this is quite an illuminating interpretation. Because so many of us wait for others to prove themselves before we move into deeper levels of intimacy. Which means that quite often, we are waiting for a really long time. Caught in an endless dance of hesitation. Deferring vulnerability until we have achieved a perfect state of trust, a state that never quite seems to arrive.

And so our relationships remain, very often, on a surface level. Transactional. Even banal. We may be connected in so many ways, and yet still feel a certain emptiness, a loneliness.

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In a recent blog post on relationships, the Franciscan spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, explicates philosopher Martin Buber's important perspective on relationships. Buber contends that "the modern world has mostly entered into an I-it relationship with reality, when we [are], in fact, created for a constant I-Thou relationship.

The I-Thou relationship is an attitude of reverence and mutuality in which we encounter people, things, and events as subject to subject, knowing and being known, giving and receiving, taking insofar as we can also surrender. In this fully mature state, those in I-Thou relationships refuse to objectify anything or anyone, but always allow things and people to be a fellow subject—even those they might dislike.”<sup>6</sup>

This I-Thou relationship is so key. It is the kind of relationship that Jesus sought to establish with his disciples when he called them friends. It is the kind of relationship that Jesus seeks to establish with us, too...if we will allow it.

Jesus is always reaching out his hand...to overcome separateness.

Indeed: in many ways, this is the sum total of his mission: overcoming separateness.

Jesus is trying to show us that our separateness is ultimately illusory. That connection and relationship are the deepest truth of reality. Only connect. Only connect.

Remember: Jesus "did not honor the disciples with friendship because of their demonstrated fidelity; it was an act of grace bestowed on them as his fallible followers. His revelation to them created their friendship with him and thus with one another.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus was determined to create a community of friends, starting with his unlikely and unwieldy collection of disciples. Determined that by loving us first, by taking this risk on us, we might be moved to take this risk on one another. Might be moved to make one another our friends. To make self-giving love our religion.

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And so, taking Jesus' example, I wonder what it would look like for us to love first, for us to be people who regularly make the first move toward friendship? For us to come to understand friend-making as a primary way to expressing our discipleship...our faith.

It can sound so confrontational, so coercive, even, to speak of making someone our friend. We never want to force ourselves on others. We don't want to violate anyone's freedom of choice. We don't want to impose.

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4 Fitzgerald, 285.

5 Ibid.

6 <https://cac.org/the-mirroring-gaze-2018-05-01/>

7 Fitzgerald, 286.

It would be rude, wouldn't it? But in the name of non-imposition, we tend to mostly leave others well enough alone. We mostly choose non-engagement. We mostly choose separateness—which we gussy up and call privacy.

But hear this good news...which might also feel like not-so-good news. Christians are not called to be private people. Rather, Christians are called to be public people. People who exist for the good of others. people who are ready and willing to become friends. People who are willing to take the risk of friendship, knowing that rejection and betrayal are always possible. People who make the first move, sharing of themselves even when they're not sure what, if anything, they'll get in return.

And the best news, of course, is that so often when people are treated with love, they begin to feel more lovable, and then they become more and more able to act in loving ways. Love grows more love.

Which is why Jesus can make sense of "laying down his life for his friends." Because he knows that love begets love. That loving greatly sets worlds in motion. That loving greatly makes everything possible. That loving greatly is the only thing that really matters.

I wonder: will you be remembered for the greatness of your love? Will I? Wouldn't you like to be remembered that way? Wouldn't you like to have been in the world that way? A blessing. Yes.

What is to stop you?

Amen.