

“Jesus: A Friend for the Journey”

Text: John 15: 9-17

Prayer: God of love and friendship, may we welcome your holy presence among us and within us as we listen and reflect on your Word today. Amen.

A middle school teacher asked her class to write imaginative definitions of a friend. These were the descriptions she received:

“A friend is a pair of open arms in a society of armless people.”

“A friend is a warm bedroll on a cold and frosty night.”

“A friend is a mug of hot coffee on a damp cloudy day.”

“A friend is a beautiful orchard in the middle of the desert.” “

“A friend is a hot bath after you have walked 20 miles on a dusty road.”

I’ve been thinking about friends and the meaning of friendship as we celebrate our 174th church anniversary. BCUC is a haven of friendship— a place of prayer where kindred souls meet. A safe space for learning, nurturing and growing, where friends, young and old alike, have a place to call it their second home. A place where little Cian and Millie and Great Grandma Ruth and Great Grandpa Ian can meet for worship and enjoy a wonderful time together. The celebration of life services held in this place gathered family and friends in a time of grieving and losing loved ones. They helped me understand that true friendships connect everyone - in life, in death and beyond death. A British publication once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. The winning definition reads: “A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out.”

One of the best quotes on friendship comes from the Gospel of John: “This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.” (Jn. 15:13). Jesus calls his disciples 'friends' from the Greek word *philos*. Friendship was an important topic in the Greek and Roman cultures. For classical philosophers like Plato, friendship was a key social relationship. In the *Symposium*, Plato writes, “Only those who love, wish to die for others.” In the first century, a “friend” was immediately understood as “one who loves.” This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point for reclaiming friendship as a resource for faith and ethics for contemporary Christians. Friendship is a word of intimacy and depth. Jesus speaks of his disciples as 'friends', not followers, not servants, not subordinates, not second-class citizens. Just

simply friends. As a friend, Jesus showed his disciples the very heart of God. Jesus asked his disciples to keep the teachings and values that he shared with them. They have to treat each other as bff's – Best Friends Forever not as master/servant relationship, in order to attain their common goal – God's reign here on earth.

There are two dimensions of friendship in the first century Mediterranean world: the gift of one's life to one's friends and the use of frank and open speech. Both informed the way that the Gospel of John and its readers understood language about friendship. To be considered a friend was to be in a position of honour. Being a friend meant being treated as kin. To be a friend meant to look out for the welfare of the other, to put the other's needs on an equal footing with one's own. Friendship implied reciprocity as well -- to consider someone a friend meant counting on that person to return that level of concern and care. When Jesus calls the disciples "friends", he is investing them with this concern. Jesus relates to his followers in an egalitarian way. He has expressly rejected "servants" in favor of "beloved friends"-- a relationship of equality. In the foot washing, which is a story unique in the Gospel of John, Jesus offers himself completely to his disciples, assuming the social role of servant, in order to give a tangible shape to his love. Friends, not masters, wash the feet of guests, and in the foot washing, Jesus does the ultimate act of hospitality and friendship. Kris Lewis says: "Jesus calls his disciples friends and in doing so, he upsets the usual teacher-pupil relationship, he breaks boundaries, and he brings a new dimension to the bond he has with his disciples. No longer are they master and servant. Rather, they are 'friends' with all that entails."

Sallie McFague, in her book *Models of God*, discusses the characteristics of friendship in biblical and theological terms. McFague writes: "Friendship does not arise from necessity. We enter into it freely. Friendship is based on a disinterested love for the unique characteristics of the other. For modern readers, Jesus' definition of love and friendship in John—to lay down one's life for one's friend—is completely exceptional. Most contemporary language about friendship does not speak in terms of life and death and martyrdom. Our day-to-day choices are not likely to lead to martyrdom, but each day we have to decide how we will spend our time, our resources, our talents, our lives."

Being a true friend as Jesus modeled to his early followers may mean so many things. It could mean walking the extra mile, standing with the people who are losing, doing good that will receive no applause, building partnerships with people in Chipembi, treating marginalized and displaced people as children of God, shopping for someone else's groceries, reading stories to someone else's children, taking flowers to someone who's not a friend, visiting someone else's mother in the nursing home, talking about faith when we would rather be silent, doing good for people who will do not good to us in return, praying not for an easier life but for strength to give our lives away. I could go on and on... And what do we get in return? Nothing fancy - just a dose of tremendous comfort and peace of mind knowing that you have made a difference in someone's life. And yes – you gain a friend or two or more!

What is your definition of friendship? Are you experiencing that particular definition? What kind of a friend are you? What makes you a friend to others? Common values and interests? A shared sense of humor? Is it a similar world view? Is it just that you find yourself sharing a common time and place and it is merely convenient? Imagine what the world would be like if we all treat each other as friends.

To think of Jesus as a friend for the journey means that we find Jesus in our human friendships. We see the face of Jesus in the face of others. We can catch a glimpse of God's presence in our most common and mundane encounters with friends. We see the face of Jesus in the faces of those not only who we care for but also those who are ignored by society or those who felt lost, scared or anxious. By being friends, we create a family. Today is a wonderful time to celebrate the friendships made and future friendships in this congregation and the community as a whole. Being a friend meant looking out for the welfare of the other, to put the other's needs on an equal footing with one's own.

Let me close with a paraphrase of Psalm 8 entitled "Friendship flowers" written by Rev, James Taylor in his book *Everyday Psalms*:

O God, what glorious gifts you have given.

Above the marvels of nature rises the miracle of friendship.

Friends take time for each other. They put their lives in each other's hands.

Stars and nebulas are far away, but friends are near at hand.

Friendship flowers unpredictably.

The desert blooms, the ice melts, the distance disappears.

Friendship has no parallel in the world.

Envy and jealousy dissolve.

Fear and suspicion evaporate.

This is how God meant the world to be.

Nothing compares with the wonder of friendship.

O God, our God, what a glorious gift you have given!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary group

Alyce Mackenzie, patheos.org.

Gail R. O'Day, "I Have Called You My Friends" Lynne M. Dolan, "Friendship"

Kris Lewis, The Witness