

May 9, 2021
John 15:9-17

Easter 6
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Abiding Friends”

“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.”

“Are you a friend of Bill?”

That seemingly innocent question is a means of identifying fellow members of Alcoholic Anonymous, which has helped generations of people overcome the scourge of alcoholism and other addictions. The “Bill” in the question refers to Bill Wilson, who cofounded AA in 1935 to overcome his own addiction to alcohol. The founding principles of AA center on the Twelve Steps and are rooted in relationships that are established in meetings in which the anonymity of each person is held sacred. At the end of every meeting, all participants share the words of encouragement to “keep coming back,” because it is through these gatherings that people find the strength to overcome the affects of this disease and build a life that is free from the enslavement caused by these addictive substances.

True friendship is built on relationships. At a time when social media has cheapened the meaning of friendship (a Facebook “friend” may be a person we do not know) we recognize the importance of friendships which center on our presence in the lives of one another. True friends are more than mere acquaintances, or people with whom we share common interests, or people we may see or communicate with from time to time. True friends are intimately involved in each other’s lives, people with whom we share our deepest secrets and desires, people who we can rely on in good times and especially in bad times. True friendship is *abiding* friendship; it is an intimacy that is expressed when “*we share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear; and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.*” (ELW Hymn 656).

The relationship between Jesus and his followers in most of the Gospel was one of teacher and student; the disciples sat at Jesus’ feet as he taught them, followed him as he journeyed from town to town, and witnessed his miracles and the reaction of the crowds. They had come to confess that Jesus was “*the Messiah, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:16) and that “*you have the Word of eternal life*” (John 6:68). It was an intimate relationship in which the disciples had left everything behind and were present with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, but it was clearly a

relationship in which they were called to be servants of our Lord, as *“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

But that relationship changes in today’s Gospel lesson, which is a part of the Farewell Discourse in John’s Gospel which are Jesus’ parting words to his disciples prior to his Crucifixion. They are a continuation of Jesus’ use of vine imagery to teach them that *“I am the vine, you are the branches”* (15:5), that both their identity and the source of their nourishment are dependent on their abiding relationship with Jesus; for *“just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me”* (15:4). As Paul’s image of the body of Christ reminds us that the Christian faith is not an individual pursuit but a relationship with Jesus and those who through Holy Baptism have been made members of the Body of Christ, so does Jesus’ identification of himself as the vine to which we are joined remind us that *“we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s”* (Romans 14:7-8).

The ground of the community’s abiding in with Jesus is the love that God and Jesus share with each other and that the community is called to enact: *“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”* (15:9-10). The “love” of which Jesus speaks is *agape*, the word that is specifically related to God’s love which finds its expression in the gift of God’s only Son (*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life”* – 3:16) the love that Paul describes as a love that *“bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”* (1 Corinthians 13:7). It is a love that is rooted in relationship, in “abiding” (*meno*) in the steadfast love of God that is present in Jesus Christ, a relationship that is established when we keep Jesus’ commandment to *“love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (13:34-35).

- “For John, love is related to being in or remaining in Jesus. Love and obedience are mutually dependent. Love arises out of obedience, obedience out of love.” – Raymond Brown.

The unity and mutuality of this abiding love makes possible the gift of joy: *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete”* (15:11). Joy is presented as flowing from the obedience and love of which Jesus has spoken. Jesus’ own joy springs from his union with the Father which finds expression in obedience and love (*“I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father”* – 14:31). The obedience and love to which in turn Jesus calls his disciples both constitute and witness to their union with him, and it is this union that will be the source of their joy. The unity and mutuality that love makes possible, symbolized by the unity of vine and branches, leads to a joy that is “complete” because it is the fulfillment of God’s loving will for all people in Jesus Christ *“so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves”* (17:13).

Jesus goes on to restate the love commandment he first gave his disciples at the Last Supper (13:34), followed by the most explicit statement in the Gospel of what it means to love as Jesus loves: *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (15:13). The classical Greek ideal of friendship as laying down one’s life for one’s friends is given new content through the life and death of Jesus. The model of the disciples’ love is Jesus’ supreme act of love, his laying down his life: *“We know love my this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another”* (1 John 3:16).

- “Love in this passage is not a psychological state, not is it anywhere described as an internal quality. Love is an action – a really difficult action. The definition of love here is a radical willingness to die – not for your child or spouse, but for a fellow follower of Christ.” – Emily Askew.

As Jesus defines love as an action that may entail sacrificing one’s very life for one’s friends, so also does Jesus define friendship as being rooted in obedience to his commandment to love one another. “Friend” (*philos*) comes from the verb “to love” (*phileo*). When Jesus speaks of friends here, he is really saying “those who are loved,” the way that Lazarus is described earlier in the Fourth Gospel (*“So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’”* – 11:3). Jesus’ understanding of friendship is wholly grounded in Jesus’ particular love; to be Jesus’ friend and to love Jesus are synonymous, because both are defined as keeping Jesus’ commandments. Because they will be participating in the same self-giving acts of love and friendship that Jesus will offer in giving his life for the sake of others, Jesus now announces to his disciples that *“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.”*

(15:15). Jesus' disciples are now his friends because he has kept nothing about God from them (*"The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father"* – 16:25). It is the events of Jesus' hour that determine the change in status from servants to "those who are loved." Jesus reminds his disciples that their place with him is the result of his initiative, not theirs: *"You did not choose me but I chose you"* (15:16). Relationship with Jesus is ultimately a result of God's grace:

- "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day ... No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day." – 6:37-39, 44.

Jesus follows this reminder of the disciples' election with a reminder of their commission and vocation: *"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."* (15:16b). "Appointed" (*tithemi*) is the verb used in v. 13 to speak of laying down one's life, as *"the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"* (10:11). The disciples' commission is grounded in Jesus' gift of his life; they are commissioned by Jesus to go and do works of love (*"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world"* – 17:18). Jesus describes the disciples' works as *"fruit that will last (meno),"* suggesting that their works, too, will attest to the abiding presence of and union with God and Jesus. As a final guarantee of this union, Jesus repeats his promise of answered prayer: *"the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name."*

- "Jesus prays to God with full confidence that he will be heard and will be answered, and he promises the disciples that they can pray with that same confidence. They thus share fully in Jesus' relationship with God, further evidence that they are Jesus' 'friends.'" – Gail O'Day.

Jesus concludes this section of the discourse with a reminder that *"I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another"* (15:17), a fitting ending for a section so concerned with love; *"it stands in striking contrast with the message of the world's hate that is to follow."* (Brown).

Jesus' teaching to his disciples is a lesson for all of us who follow in their footsteps as those who are chosen and called by Christ in Holy Baptism to be his church, and what it means for us in how we live together as the community of God's faithful people. We are a people who are a "*chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,*" but this calling also comes with a commission that we must obey if we are to truly be the people our Lord has called his friends: "... *in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Peter 2:9). Our calling as Jesus' "friends" is our commission to live as friends who abide with our Lord and with one another, friends whose love is embodied in our presence with one another, our caring for one another, and our deeds of lovingkindness for the world that God so loved that God gave his only Son for the sake of all people, so that "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Romans 10:13). Being a "friend" of our Lord and of one another entails far more than a few clicks on social media; it means embodying Christ's love in all of our words and deeds, making certain that "*the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer*" (Psalm 19:14). It means abiding in the loving friendship that Jesus has established with us so that our abiding friendship with others may bear fruit that will bless all people with the abundant joy that is God's loving will for all people.

- "The life of such a person, whether great or small and of no matter what it is called, is nothing but fruit and cannot be without fruit; for in Christ that person has been born into a new existence, in order to be constantly full of good fruit. Everything such a person does becomes easy, not troublesome or vexatious. Nothing then is too arduous or too difficult to suffer and bear." – Martin Luther.

Being a "friend of Bill" means being in a relationship with other members of AA. It means being present at meetings, being a source of strength and encouragement for others battling the disease of alcoholism and knowing that this friendship requires each friend to "keep coming back." One can only be a "friend of Bill" if they endeavor to be abiding friends in lives that are free of the bondage of addiction. Being a "friend of Jesus" also implies a commitment to abide in our Lord as the source of strength and hope, "*because apart from me you can do nothing*" (15:5). It means abiding in our Lord and with one another; it means being present even in these times of social distancing, using every means at our disposal to be friends that abide with each other, encourage one another, and share the love of Jesus so that we all know that God is with us and that the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love are cords that cannot be broken because we are bound together in the love of God from

which nothing can separate us, a love that is eternal because it is the love of God “*which never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

- “Community is the place where people give to one another. We are not God, but we can be mediators (in a limited way) of the unlimited love of God. Community is the place of joy and celebration where we can say to one another, ‘Be of good cheer: the Lord has overcome the world, the Lord has overcome the evil one. Do not be afraid.’ ... Community is the place from which we speak the Good News to the world: ‘Don’t be afraid. Look, it has already happened. Christ is risen.’” – Henri Nouwen.

Knowing that a person is a “friend of Bill” gives one confidence that such a friendship will be real and present in supporting each friend in their sobriety. When we are identified as a “friend of Jesus,” we know that we have in each other a source of love, strength, comfort, and hope, because a “friend of Jesus” is one who has been called by our Lord, nurtured, and strengthened through our rootedness in the true vine, and called to bear the fruits of God’s love and blessed hope with one another. Being a “friend of Jesus” means that we are a friend indeed – and in deed!

Amen.