

I Have Called You Friends

John 15:9 –17

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"I've loved you the way God has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done – kept God's commands and made myself at home in that love. "I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy fulfilled. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from God."

John 15:9-17 The Message

In August 2019, at the beginning of the school year in Wichita, Kansas, a photo showing two little boys holding hands went viral. Connor, an autistic boy entering the second grade, was going to school alone for the first time. Although the bus trip went well, when he arrived at the school, he froze with fear and started to cry. He hid by the corner unable to walk into the building. Christian, another boy, saw Connor and went to comfort him. The he took Connor by the hand and led him inside the building. "He found me and held my hand, and I got happy tears," Connor later told a reporter when asked about Christian. "He was kind to me. I was in the first day of school and I started crying. Then he helped me and I was happy." Connor's mother said, "Christian is Connor's first real friend." Christian's mother explained, "They have an inseparable bond." (1)

Like millions of others who saw the photograph and read this story, I felt emotional, unable to hold back small tears of joy. I also laughed because who would believe it without a picture. A white boy named Connor huddled by a corner, a black boy named Christian reaching out to help him. It was an updated American parable, a rewrite of *The Pilgrims Progress* for an age of racial anxiety and political division. As I looked at the photograph it seemed an icon for these days, Jesus tenderly leading a frightened toward a safe, loving new place, the kin-dom of God. "This is my commandment," said Jesus, "that you love one another as I have loved you... You are my friends if you do what I command you." (John 15:12-14)

Friends. Friendship. The story of Connor and Christian tells us so much. Friendship is contingent on love – compassion, empathy, reaching out, going beyond what we imagine is possible. That is the command: love. And when we reach out in love, friendship is the result, joy is the result. Friendship with school mates, with people at church, with God.

Turning to our passage from John, it takes place at night. Gathered at the table with his companions, Jesus is fully present to those whose lives have become so intertwined with his. Though Jesus tells the disciples that he has made everything known to them, he sees what lies ahead more clearly than they can. And so he lingers at the table, telling them all that he wants them to understand, preparing them as best he can for the time when he will no longer be physically present to them. He washes their feet and gives his final teaching.

Even as he works with such intention and care to make the disciples ready for his absence, Jesus impresses upon them that he is not letting them go, that his physical departure will not bring an end to his relationship with them, his loving of them. *Abide in my love*, he urges them, echoing and expounding on the imagery of the vine. He entwines his words around them, calling them to stay with him, to remain, to persist in their sacred entanglement that will bear fruit for a hungry world.

In a world where leavings and endings often carry a sense of abandonment, Jesus somehow manages to make an art of departure. He does not turn his face from the pain involved, yet he draws the eyes and ears of his companions to the power and beauty and grace of the connections they have forged: connections that, though changing, will endure. *I have called you friends*, he says to them. *Abiding love, laying down life kind of love, is the connection that will sustain you. I am your place in this world.* And says to us: offering himself, seeking us, lingering with us still.

For much of his ministry he taught, acted and modeled the way he expected all his followers to think and act. In that sense, they had been apprentices under his guidance. Now they were being taken to a deeper level of relationship: friend. Why? Jesus would be depending on his friends to be the hands and feet for the loving being and doing of the Holy One.

Our lives, our actions, our love carry and reveal the presence of divine love. Jesus does not give us something, he says we are something. We are the gift. We are the connection. Listen to what he tells the disciples:

I love you with the same love that Abba loves me. You have what I have.
I give to you the joy that my Loving Parent and I share. You are a part of Divine Love.
You are my joy, my life, and my purpose.
I want your joy to be full, complete, whole,
You are my friends, my peers, my equals.
I have told you everything. Nothing is held back or kept secret.
I chose you. I picked you. I wanted you.
I appointed, ordained, commissioned, and sent you to bear fruit, to love another.
I trust and believe you can do this.

It's all about us in the best sense of those words. We are the love of Christ. Jesus' words change how we see ourselves, one another, the world, and the circumstances of our lives. When we are rooted in love, it allows us to keep his commandment to love one another. When we know these things about ourselves our only response is love. We can do nothing else. We are free to live and more fully become the love of Christ. We are holy friends sharing in this being, abiding in this love in the world and sharing in the actions of love.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* writes:

Christianity did not begin with a confession. It began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.

And in her new book *Freeing Jesus*, she explores more about Jesus as friend.

Early Christians, most of whom were Jews, knew Hebrew scripture references to friendship with God. And they extended the idea of divine friendship to Jesus. The New Testament vividly recounts the closeness of Jesus' circle, women and men transformed through their relationship with him. The only time in which Jesus cries is at the tomb of Lazarus, whom he referred to as "our friend."

Sitting there together that night, Jesus brought them to the very heart of God and then revealed God's heart longed for friendship. They had heard this story before – Abraham, Moses, Miriam were friends of God, as were the prophets and heroes like Ruth and Naomi, Esther, David and Jonathan. They served God and they were friends of God. Friendship, the knowing, loving, and free and joyful giving is the passionate desire of God.

And now Jesus was saying, "I have called you friends" not just to special people of the past whose names were recorded in sacred memory, but to the ragged fisherman and curious women sitting around him listening to his stories, trusting for the first time that the God of Israel had not forgotten them, souls and bodies broken under the weight of Roman oppression. They were not slaves. They were friends of Jesus, friends of the loving God. (2)

How do we learn about being friends with God? How do we learn to love? A friend who is a pastor wrote this about this scripture passage.

Today's gospel reading (John 15:9-17) is a great passage to be read on Mother's Day, as well as for the times in which we are living. It speaks of the One who promises to abide in us, and invites us to abide in the Divine Heart.....We learn about love, because God's love abides/dwells in us. And when we love, then our love dwells/abides in another, as well as in God. The same is true with grace, hope, joy, peace, justice, and all the other marvelous gifts of God.

I have often said that everything I know about God I learned from my mother. Long before it became a slogan, my mother persisted in being a mother, a friend, a person of faith in the midst of a painful marriage and financial as well as emotional struggles. She went to work, when women 'just didn't do that.' ...She raised five children with few complaints. She was involved in her church life, and made sure her children were as well. She was a woman of strong love, which continues to abide in her children. She shared extraordinary grace, lived with hope, was passionate about caring for others, and believed in the joy and wonder God offers to us. These gifts continue to abide in me. (3)

Who was it that loved you deeply and offered love as a mother to you as a child? Maybe it was your mother or grandmother or aunt or another woman in your life.

I want to close as we remember one woman today who worked for change and saw facilitating friendships among mothers as part of her calling.

Ann Reeves Jarvis and her husband lived in the Appalachian Mountains of Western Virginia where Ann gave birth to 12 children. Due to terribly unhealthy conditions in the area, only 4 of her children survived to adulthood. Something had to change and Ann was going to make the change happen. She became a crusader for public health, establishing in churches across the area “Mother’s Day Work Clubs.” These weren’t book clubs or quilting bees. These were “make our world better” clubs. These crusading women would visit local families to provide information and education on sanitation, nutrition and overall health. The clubs raised money to help families who needed assistance covering medical costs.

After the Civil War Ann Reeves Jarvis became a force for reconciliation between the North and South. In 1868, despite threats of violence, club members held a “Mother’s Day of Friendship” for veterans from both sides of the war. The women arranged for the band to play first the Confederate ballad, “Dixie,” then the Union’s “Star Spangled Banner.” The song-fest ended with the entire community joining together to sing “Auld Lang Syne.” The event was a great success despite the fear of many that it would erupt in violence. Mothers’ Friendship Day was an annual event for several years. (4)

We give thanks for Ann Reeves Jarvis and her vision of women who built bridges of friendship. We give thanks for Christian and his loving hand of friendship offered to Connor. We give thanks for our friends who have been blessings on our journey. May we daily abide in Holy Love and friendship with God. Amen.

1) quoted on page 9 of *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence* by Diana Butler Bass. HarperOne, 2021.

2) Bass, page 14-15

3) Thom Shuman on Facebook post, 5.8.21

4) *Mother’s Day: Protests, Pacifism, Peacemaking*, Posted on May 14, 2018, by Phillip Wright
<https://phillipwright.co/tag/ann-reeves-jarvis/>