

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus' Friends"
SERMON TEXT: John 15:9-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 6, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Many of you know that I drove to Montana in mid-April to get my mom and bring her here for a 2-week visit. Then, early this past week, I returned her home to Libby. In between, we had some nice time together, visited the Tulip Festival, and accomplished another particular goal. We bought Mom a new computer, and I helped her set it up and learn how to use it. As I was teaching her, I tried to find lessons that were relevant and motivational to her—like being able to read email from her friends and download and save pictures from her family.

Since Mom's handwriting is getting a little wobbly, she also said she'd like to be able to print mailing labels from her computer. So, before I left my mom's apartment on Tuesday morning, I decided to type up her old address book entries into an Excel data base. It was interesting going through that old book, seeing who had died, moved, grown up, gotten divorced, or been scratched off the Christmas card mailing list for lack of contact. Of course, others were such close friends that mom didn't really need to *mail* them anything—because she could just hand it to them at church or when they got together somewhere else.

Friends are important. If you look up "friendship" on the internet, you can see all kinds of studies and statistics about the health and longevity benefits of having friends. And, yet, even in this era when a person can have hundreds or thousands of "friends" on Facebook, we know that quality friendships are hard to make and difficult to keep.

Because most of us do want to have friends and be friends, our ears tune in quickly to a scripture like today's passage from the Gospel of John. In John 15:9-17, Jesus uses the word "friends" three times. Let's take a look and see what it would mean for us to be Jesus' friends.

1—JESUS' FRIENDS OBEY HIS COMMANDMENTS

The first clue we see is that Jesus' friends obey his commandments. It's right there in verse 14: "You are my friends if you do what I command you." Obedience isn't something we usually associate with friendship. We prefer to think of friends as partners, who give and take equally. Friends suggest, compromise, and negotiate. Friendships are often made and sustained around common interests and values. So, rarely is there any need for commands. In fact, when one friend starts giving orders to the other, that's usually a pretty quick indicator that something is wrong with the relationship.

But I think we can also realize that there are times when we have friendly relations with persons who have power over us. Our bosses may not be our best friends, but we appreciate it when they're friendly enough to express interest in our families, our hobbies, and our health. Moms and dads don't carry out their parental responsibilities well when they try to be best friends with their underage children, but parents can demonstrate many of the same qualities as a friend. The saying, "It's good to have friends in high places," indicates that we may not have all the privileges, knowledge, or pull that some folks have, but their interest in our well-being can be friend-like, as well as useful.

For three years, Jesus had clearly been the master, and his disciples had obviously been the students. But now, just before his death on the cross, Jesus was trying to bridge the distinction between himself and his disciples. Jesus had not only taught them what to do, but also why. He had given them direct access to God. That's why Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants." Even while Jesus was reminding his disciples that they needed to obey his commands, he was hoping that they would do as he asked *because they wanted to*. Like parents who tire of constantly reminding their children to behave, Jesus was hoping that eventually the disciples would incorporate his values and practices, so that these characteristics would come naturally out of their own hearts. He was hoping they would graduate from being stubborn followers and start acting like inspired leaders. Then their relationship would be more mutual and more partner-like. Then they would be Jesus' friends.

But, in case there was any lag in their self-motivation and maturation, Jesus wanted to make sure the disciples understood him clearly. Jesus' friends are those people who obey his commandments.

2—JESUS' FRIENDS LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Jesus didn't give his disciples a lot of rules. In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus spoke about the two greatest commandments: to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Because his disciples were growing in understanding and Christian maturity, Jesus was trusting them to work out the details for themselves. Here in John 15, Jesus assumed the love of God and emphasized only the second basic rule: Jesus' friends love one another.

Love may be something we have trouble thinking about in the context of friendship. While preparing for this sermon, I looked up the word "love" in a joke book, and all the entries were about love at first sight, sexual attraction, marriage being the cure for love, and such things as that. Apparently—at least in the realm of humor and comedy—the dominant meaning of "love" is romance.

But that's in our English language. In the New Testament language of ancient Greek, there were at least five different words for love. And the one that Jesus was using here was *agape*. This is the kind of Christian love that supersedes romantic love or brotherly love, which by nature are rather limited and selective. With *agape* love, all who are Jesus' friends should love one another. There should be no ornery squabbling in the church. Those who claim to be Jesus' friends should find ways to resolve their differences and get along in the loving spirit of Jesus.

But *agape* love isn't limited to loving one another inside the church, either. As friends of Jesus, we extend our love to those who are outside of the church family, as well. *Agape* love reaches out even to those who are different from us or unattractive to us. Because *agape* love doesn't require reciprocity, we don't wait to see if someone is going to love us back. We take a risk and extend our love first because we are energized by the love which Jesus has already given to us.

There's a great example of this *agape* love in Acts chapter 10. In that story, Peter had a dream in which God told him to go to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius. Being a Jew, Peter would have sensed at the core of his being that making such a visit was wrong. Peter would have had a deeply-ingrained religious aversion to going to the house of an "unclean" person who didn't keep the Jewish commandments about diet and circumcision. And yet, the love of Jesus was powerful enough to help Peter recognize the need to break this rule and cross this religious and cultural barrier. Overcoming the prejudices of his religious upbringing, Peter went to the house of Cornelius and offered the gospel and baptism of Jesus Christ. Peter went to the house of the "unclean" Gentile and offered *agape* love.

Today, we are under this same commandment of love. If we are Jesus' friends, then we will love one another—not just within the church, not just within our families, and not just within our close circle of friends—but also those who are outside. We'll break down traditional limitations and barriers. We won't wait for those people to love us first. We'll take the initiative to reach out to those who are different in religion, race, nationality, orientation, and socio-economic bracket. Because we're Jesus' friends, we'll love one another.

3—JESUS' FRIENDS BEAR FRUIT THAT WILL LAST

John 15 points us to a third characteristic of Jesus' friends. Jesus' friends bear fruit that will last. In verse 5, Jesus says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches." Jesus says that those persons, or branches, who remain in him will bear much fruit. According to verse 16, this isn't a banana that will decay quickly. This fruit is like an apple that can be kept in a cellar all winter long. This is fruit that will last.

Bible scholars know that the earliest gospel written was Mark, probably composed in the late AD 60s or early 70s, with Matthew and Luke following in the next couple decades. The Gospel according to John came last, probably in the 90s or early 100s. So, it stands to reason that the person who wrote this gospel knew something about staying power. In the approximately seven decades since Jesus' death on

the cross, many disciples had come and gone. Some would have died, but others probably fell away because of false expectations or their own spiritual unfaithfulness. But the writer of John's gospel held onto Jesus' words about remaining in the vine, and bearing fruit that would last.

There are some Christians who put a great deal of stock in demonstrations of emotion, or flashy displays of spiritual gifts. They think a lot of pizzazz is what proves someone is really connected spiritually. And, I won't deny that there is some biblical precedence for that. But, in John 15, we see that our calling as friends of Jesus isn't to some kind of flamboyant charisma that gets us excited and then quickly fizzles. Jesus was more interested in a steady faith development. When we branches remain connected to the vine, our gifts will continue over a lifetime. Our spirits will grow toward the likeness and perfection of Jesus. We'll find Jesus' commandments easier each day. We'll love each other more and more completely. As Jesus' friends, we'll bear fruit that will last.

CONCLUSION

Most of what I've said in this sermon is about *our* part in being a friend to Jesus. But, as we read in verse 16, we're able to be Jesus' friends because he first chose us to be his friends. Maybe you'll understand the kind of friendship I'm talking about if I tell you a baseball story.

In his first seasons with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Jackie Robinson, the first black man to play Major League baseball, faced venom nearly everywhere he traveled--fastballs at his head, spikings on the bases, brutal epithets from the opposing dugouts and from the crowds. During one game in Boston, the taunts and racial slurs seemed to reach a peak. In the midst of this, another Dodger, a Southern white named Pee Wee Reese, called timeout. He walked from his position at shortstop toward Robinson at second base, put his arm around Robinson's shoulder, and stood there with him for what seemed like a long time. The gesture spoke more eloquently than the words: This man is my friend.*

We're able to obey Jesus' commandments, love one another, and bear fruit that will last—not because we're such great Christians all on our own. We're loved and chosen by Jesus first. Jesus walks over to us and puts his arm around us. That's how we're able to be Jesus' friends.

*Willie Morris in *Parade*, as found at <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/friendship.htm>