

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus' Friends"  
SERMON TEXT: John 15:5-17  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: May 15, 2022, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

On Thursday morning, I drove over to Community United Methodist Church and picked up Rev. Steve Reinhard. We then drove to Salt Lake City, where we met up with 11 other United Methodist clergy colleagues in a restaurant. We had a nice lunch and lots of conversation as we caught up on happenings in our churches and families. One of our group will soon be retiring, one will be moving to a new church in Colorado, and one is becoming the District Superintendent of the Montana West District. So we were also offering congratulations, and wishing our friends well as we sent them on their way.

One of the beauties of the United Methodist connectional system is that good-byes are rarely final. The one who is retiring will be moving to Nevada, but I will see him in June at Annual Conference in Helena and maybe at other some annual conferences in the future. And the two who are moving to Colorado and Montana will still be in our Mountain Sky Conference, so there will be lots of opportunities to interact and do ministry with them in the future. We United Methodist clergy have a special bond with one another. None of us are members of a local church. Our membership is with the conference. So, even though we might move from one church to another and even from one state to another, we stay in relationship with our colleagues over decades of ministry. We love our reunions because we are like sisters and brothers and cousins. Most certainly we are like friends.

Today's sermon is on the subject of friendship—specifically, on friendship with Jesus. Let's check out these verses in John 15 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's 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 are friendly. 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 in John 15, just before his death on the cross, Jesus was trying to bridge the distinction between himself and his disciples. He said, "I no longer call you servants." Even while Jesus was reminding his disciples that they needed to obey his commands, he was hoping they would do as he asked *because they wanted to*. Like parents who tire of constantly reminding their children how 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 that they would graduate from being stubborn and rebellious 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 perfectly 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 commandments. Because they were growing in understanding and Christian maturity, Jesus was trusting them to work out many of the details for themselves. So, in verse, 17, Jesus emphasized only the very basic rule: Jesus' friends love one another.

Love is something we English speakers have trouble thinking about in the context of friendship. It's more natural for us to think of love in regard to romance and marriage—or in regard to parents, children, and siblings. We may even use the word *love* in regard to ice cream or chocolate. But rarely do we use the word *love* when we're talking about our friends. That's a limitation of our English language.

In the original Greek of the New Testament, however, there were at least five different words for love. And the word that Jesus was using here was *agape*. That's the kind of Christian love that supersedes romantic love or brotherly love, which can be quite limited and selective. With *agape* love, all who are Jesus' friends should love one another. There should be no preferential cliques or 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.

*Agape* love is not limited to loving each other inside the church, however. As friends of Jesus, we extend our love to those who are outside the church family, as well. *Agape* love reaches out to even 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 beautiful illustration of this truth in Acts chapter 10. That chapter tells about the Apostle Peter's Jewish aversion to going to the house of an "unclean" Gentile. But the love of Jesus was powerful enough to help Peter recognize the need to cross that religious and cultural barrier. Overcoming the prejudices and limitations of his religious upbringing, Peter went to the house of

Cornelius and offered the gospel and baptism of Jesus Christ. Peter went into the house of Cornelius and offered *agape* love.

We today are under this same commandment of love. If we are Jesus' friends, then we will love one another—not just within our church, our families, or our close circle of chosen friends—but also those outside. We will reach out to those who are different in religion, race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic bracket. We will love one another because we are Jesus' friends.

### **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. At the start of this chapter, Jesus said he was the vine, and his disciples were the branches, who would bear much fruit. In verse 16, Jesus picks up that imagery again. According to verse 16, this fruit of the vine isn't like a banana that will bruise and decay quickly. This fruit is more like an apple that can be kept in a cellar all winter long. The fruit of Jesus' friends is fruit that will last.

Bible scholars think that the earliest gospel written was Mark, possibly composed in the late A.D. 60s or early 70s. The gospel of Matthew was probably written next, followed by Luke. The Gospel of John probably came last, in the A.D. 90s or early 100s. So, it stands to reason that the person who wrote this gospel knew something about staying power. Many disciples had come and gone in the six or seven decades since Jesus' death on the cross. Some would have died, and others probably fell away because of false expectations or their own spiritual unfaithfulness. But the writer of John's gospel held onto the faith and preserved 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 quick displays of spiritual gifts. They think a lot of flamboyance and 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, what we read is that our friendship with Jesus is not meant to be some sort of flash in the pan that gets us excited and then doesn't amount to much. We aren't called to be fair-weather friends who disappear

as soon as a few storm clouds roll in. No, what Jesus was more interested in was staying power. When we branches remain connected to the vine, our gifts will continue over a lifetime. Our spiritual growth will steadily move us toward the likeness of Jesus. We'll find Jesus' commandments easier each day. We'll love one another more and more completely. When we're Jesus' friends, we'll bear fruit that will last.

### **CONCLUSION**

Most of what I've said in this sermon is our part in being a friend to Jesus. But, of course, the reason we're able to be Jesus' friends is because—as stated in verse 16--Jesus first chose us.

Maybe you'll understand the kind of friendship I'm talking about if I tell you a baseball story.

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

\*By Willie Morris in *Parade*, as found at [www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/friendship.htm](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/friendship.htm) .