

Making Friends
John 15:9–17
Sunday, May 9, 2021 (Easter 6)

When we first went into lockdown last March, one of the first questions that Jen and I struggled with as parents was, “What do we do with three kids who are now at home all day and cannot see their friends?” And for the first month or two, it was pretty rough. They were stuck with *us* and with *each other* as their only companions, and I’m not sure which is worse for a kid. But about nine months earlier, a new family had moved into the house right across the street. They had two boys who were right around the age of our kids. And they had played a little bit in the months before Covid, but not every day. They were still getting to know each other. But as Jen and I talked to their parents, we found that they were of the same mind we were regarding the precautions they were taking for this virus. They had kept their social circle as small as we had. So we all decided that it was safe to let the kids play together outside. And that ended up being an absolute lifesaver.

It’s one year later, and they still play together every single day, rain or shine, snow or heat. They play basketball and baseball in the yard. They swing and play on the jungle gym. They ride bikes and skateboards and scooters. They play in sprinklers and waterslides. They make up games. Every day at 10:00 AM, Emily has a break in school at the same time that *their* youngest has a break. And so she runs out *our* front door, and he runs out *theirs*, and they play together for 30 minutes until school starts back up again. And after school ends, they will play together until the sun goes down and we force them to come inside. They have become best friends.

But *sometimes* they *fight*. They’ll have a disagreement over a game. Or someone is a sore loser. Or someone accidentally gets hit with a ball, but they are convinced that it was on purpose. And so they come stomping back home, refusing to play anymore. Sometimes it’s innocent, and

they're back outside 15 minutes later, playing again like nothing ever happened. But sometimes it's a little more serious, and we have to talk about it. And what we say is, "I know it can be frustrating. But right now, they are the only friends you've got. And *you* are the only friends *they've* got. You all need each other. So we need to find a way to work this out." We talk to them about what it means to be a *friend*. And *that* is a question that comes up in our reading from John's gospel today.

We often think of *friends* as the people we *choose* to be in relationship with. People we *like* or have a lot in common with. People we feel *affection* for. But when Jesus talked about *friends* here – and when John *wrote* about it – their first century Middle Eastern and Greco-Roman world had a slightly different understanding of the idea of friendship than *we* do. The word that John uses here is the Greek word *philo*, which is not about friendship based on mutual affection or having things in common. It had to do with the exchange of favors and support and a profound sense of *duty* to each other. *Philo* friendship was about *reciprocity* – "You do for me, and I will do for you, for the betterment of society."

Theologian Gail O'Day has written about this understanding of friendship, and she compares it to an incident with her 7-year-old daughter and her daughter's 8-year-old best friend. O'Day says that on the morning of the best friend's birthday party, her daughter said, "I don't want to go to Hannah's birthday party. I don't like her. She wasn't nice to me yesterday." O'Day explained to her that she *has* to go to the party because she and Hannah are *friends*, regardless of how she feels at that moment. And O'Day writes, "Friendship...is not simply about affection but also about social roles and responsibilities. Friendship is not defined exclusively by what the individual 'feels' for another (although affection is definitely a part of friendship). Friendship is at least as much about the social responsibilities that accompany friendship as it is about how

people choose their friends.” And *because* of this, she says, “Acts of friendship must transcend the volatility of emotions.”¹

Acts of friendship must transcend the volatility of emotions. Friendship is about something *bigger*, something *deeper* than how we *feel* about this other person. And this helps us understand the kind of friendship that Jesus is talking about.

Last week Jesus called his followers to *abide in me*, and we talked about what that *means*, what it *looks like* to abide in Christ. And what *Jesus* says that looks like in *this* week’s text is to abide in his love. It’s like in the New Testament letter of 1 John, when John writes, “If we love one another, God lives in us...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” So we abide in Christ by abiding in his love. Well, what does *that* look like? How do we do *that*? How do we *abide* in Christ’s love?

What Jesus says here is that we abide in his love by “loving one another as I have loved you.” We’ve talked before about how love is not just a *feeling* or *emotion*, something that exists in our *hearts* or our *heads*. Love is found in our *actions*. It is found in the ways that we treat each other and care for one another. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “Love is *patient*.” It is found in the ways that we are patient with one another, especially when patience is hard. “Love is *kind*.” It is found in unexpected, unsolicited gestures of kindness and care toward the other. It is not about being envious or boastful or arrogant or rude toward each other. Love does not insist on its own way but is open to the other, accepting of the other. To act lovingly is not to be irritable or resentful toward one another. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. We don’t throw it back in someone’s face when they make a mistake. Love rejoices in the *truth*. Love bears all things.

¹ https://www.richardmburgess.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/jn_15_ODay_-_Jesus_as_friend_in_the_gospel_of_John.124193245.pdf

Love *believes* in this other person. Love *hopes* for this other person. And love endures all things. What Paul is talking about there is not simply *feelings*. It's about *action*. It's about the concrete ways in which we act, not for our own wellbeing, but for the wellbeing of the other.

And what Jesus says here both *includes* all of that and goes a step further. Jesus says that the way we love one another as he loves us is by “laying down one’s life for one’s friends.” Now, that means two things. First, Jesus is talking about dying; physically giving our life for this other person. Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us, and how has he loved us? He *died* for us. He gave his life for us on the cross. And he calls us to love one another like *that*. This is no small thing that Jesus says – that the ultimate expression of love is to give your life for this other person. We might be willing to go there for our *spouse* or our *kids*, maybe a *sibling* or a very best friend. But for most of us, this is a tough ask. We can’t ignore it, though. It’s *there*. Jesus *says* this, *calls* us to this. And each of us has to wrestle with what this *means* for us, whether this is somewhere that we are willing to *follow* Christ.

There is *another* sense, though, in which Jesus intends this. To “lay down one’s life” can *also* mean to *set aside* your life. To *set aside* my needs and desires and preferences and priorities, my thoughts or preconceived notions about this other person, in order to live life together with you. Because that’s *also* what Jesus did. He didn’t just *die* for us. He *lived with* us. And that reflects the way that Paul describes love to the Corinthians. To be *patient* with someone is to take my expectations and set them aside. To be *kind* toward someone is to take my needs and set them aside for *their* needs. It is a self-sacrificial love in which I set aside *my* life and open myself up to *your* life. Whether we do that by living or dying, that is what Christ calls us to – self-sacrificing acts of love. *That* is how we abide in *his* love.

Now, with all of that in mind, there is one thing that Jesus says here that really tripped me up this week. Jesus says, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” *Friends*. To practice self-sacrificing love with the people who are your *friends*. That doesn’t seem to *fit* with what Jesus says and does all throughout the gospels. Because Jesus did not just lay down his life for his *friends*. He laid down his life for the *world*, including the people who betrayed him and denied him and rejected him and killed him. And he calls us to love our *enemies*, not just our friends. He says that *anyone* can love the people who love *them*. That’s pretty easy. The challenge is loving the people you do not necessarily *like*; laying down, setting aside our lives for *them*, as Christ did.

But this is where we go back to what we said in the beginning about what it means to be a friend. As Gail O’Day says, “Friendship...is not simply about affection but also about social roles and responsibilities...Acts of friendship must transcend the volatility of emotions.” Friendship, as Jesus and John understood it, is about something *bigger*, something *deeper* than how we *feel* about this other person. I’m sure we have all had moments with our friends where those bonds of affection are tried. Where we *disagree* or are *disappointed* with this other person. But what do we *do* with our friends? We work *through* the disagreements and disappointments and differences. We work *through* the challenges. And that process of *working through* is *love*. It keeps us *bound* to each other.

The friendship and love that Jesus calls us to is not just with those for whom we feel affection. It is for those to whom we are *socially bound*. And to whom are we socially bound? To *everyone*. We are *all* connected in this network of human life. Jesus says here, “*You* did not choose *me*, but *I* chose *you*.” And in that same way, *we* may not necessarily choose *one another*, but God has called us together, brought us together to live life with one another. We are *bound* to each other.

And we are called to *love* one another, to set aside our preferences and priorities and *lives* to make room for this other person, not just when it is *easy* or *convenient*, but *especially* when it is *hard*.

It's funny, the lectionary conveniently leaves out what happens *next*; what Jesus says *next*. Because the very next thing he says after this call to *love* is that the world will respond to this kind of love with *hate*. He says, "If they persecuted *me*, they will persecute *you*." And I think we can look at the world around us right now, at the division and polarization and *hatred* that we are seeing on so many levels, and we can see that Jesus' way of love is not the way of the world. And all too often, it's not even the way of *Christians*. But as theologian Meda Stamper writes, "It is only against the backdrop of the world's hate that the radical nature of God's love is revealed in its fullest glory. And it is into such a world that Jesus' own are sent to testify and bear fruit, to love as Jesus loves."²

That is how we abide in Christ – by abiding in his love. By laying down our lives in acts of sacrificial love for our friends. Not just those friends for whom we feel affection. But also those friends with whom the work of affection is still needed.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-159-17-3>