

**May 21, 2023**  
**Sermon Manuscript**

**John 15:9-17 (NIV)**

<sup>9</sup> (Jesus said,) “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

<sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup> This is my command: Love each other.

**More Than Servants (Jn 15:9-17)**

This morning we’re continuing to look at Jesus’ words from John 15. Last week we looked at verses 1 through 12, which included the first paragraph we read today. Today we’ve added verses 13 through 17.

With today being the Sunday after the Ascension, this passage is particularly relevant since it’s taken from Jesus’ farewell teachings that He gave following the Last Supper. Even though at that point Jesus had yet to die on the cross and rise from the dead, with this teaching He’s really preparing the disciples for the era that would begin after His ascension, when He would be physically absent and following Him would require a spiritual relationship, as it does for (all of) us today.

Well, as we look at the portion of his farewell teaching that we read today, I want to consider the implications of the first words we read, where Jesus tells his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love” (v9). “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” This morning I want to proclaim the good news that Jesus loving us as the Father has loved Him means we are more than just God’s servants; we are His friends.

Scholar David Ford observes that up to this point in the evening of the Last Supper, Jesus’ emphasis with His disciples *had been* calling them into a life of *service*. A few chapters earlier in John (ch13), Jesus had famously served his disciples by washing their feet. And in Luke’s description of the Supper, Jesus tells the disciples that the greatest among them will be the one who serves, as he is serving them.<sup>1</sup> Well, certainly the privilege of being God’s servant exceeds any earthly purpose our lives could have. But in today’s gospel passage Jesus is saying that the reward of following and trusting in Him is actually even greater than that,<sup>2</sup> because He promises to love us as the Father loved Him.

Now, we may be used to thinking of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son as a parent-child relationship - and understandably so - keep in mind that there is no hierarchy within the Trinity. In the eternal relationship between the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit, the Father does not lord over the son; instead, there is perfect mutuality. Father and Son are separate, but *equals*. Therefore, perhaps the best earthly relationship to describe this is that they are friends, just perfectly so.

And so, this is what Jesus expands upon in the second paragraph, as He says,

“<sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s

<sup>1</sup> Lk 22:26-27

<sup>2</sup> Ford: “Now a further wave of teaching on his death moves beyond the language of servants and service into that of friendship. There is no denial of the continuing importance of service, any more than there is a denial of the massive imperatives attached to the foot washing. But there is something new here...”

business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

So, what does it mean that in Jesus we become a friend of God? Well, one characteristic of friends is that they know each other. Before Jesus, the only human who was said to be anything like *friends* with God was Moses. And we know that Moses had a relationship with the Lord that far exceeded that of the other Israelites. He would go up on Mount Sinai to commune with the Lord, while the rest of the Israelites stayed down in camp at the base of the mountain. Then, later on, as this morning’s passage from Exodus (ch.33) describes, Moses would pitch a tent at “some distance” outside of the Israelite camp, where he would go in and speak to the Lord. Verse 11 says: “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, *as one speaks to a friend.*”

So, one characteristic of friends is that they know each other. Just reflecting on some of my earthly friendships, I think you’ll agree that the deeper a friendship you have with somebody the better you *know them*: meaning you know their story, their passions, their habits, what makes them tick, you know what you can expect from them in different situations. And I know this has particularly been the case for friends I’ve *lived with*: I think of a friend I have who was my college roommate for two years (the one with the swear jar I mentioned last Sunday): you really get to know somebody when you live with somebody, or as Jesus might say: when you *remain* or *abide* with them.

Well, in Jesus we have been made friends of God, because Jesus is the very revelation of God in human form. As Tebbe & Sternke of Gravity Leadership say, “God is like Jesus, and there is nothing in or about God that is not like Jesus.” So as we abide with Jesus - in this era getting to know Him through the Gospels and communing with Him in prayer through the Holy Spirit - as we do that, we get to know who God is - what He is like - more and more deeply. As we abide in the Lord we come to learn God’s story, what God is passionate about - or ‘learn’ is not the right word cuz we’re not just acquiring head knowledge - we come to know what we can expect from God in different situations, but what we get from God is not just information - a list of His characteristics - that God is loving and faithful and merciful and kind and so on. No, we come to believe and know *from experience* that this is how God is, just like we know things about our dearest friends from the countless hours spent and various situations we’ve been in with them. **The good news is that Jesus loves us as the Father has loved Him, which means we are more than just God’s servants, we are His friends.**

So becoming friends of God’s through Christ first of all means that we come to know deeply, in our bones, what God is really like.<sup>3</sup> But even more than that, we get to know God’s business. In verse 15, Jesus explains, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

So, as God’s friends, God lets us in on His business.” Now, what is the business of God? Well, the business of God is what He is up to in the world, particularly the ways He is at work to bring about the flourishing of humankind. And as His friends, God doesn’t merely give us marching orders to support that, rather He invites us to partner with Him - to participate in what He is already doing - to bring about the flourishing of others. And we can see this in how Jesus related to the Father in his earthly life: doing things the way He now intends to us to. A little earlier in John, chapter 5, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (v19) So during his earthly ministry, Jesus wasn’t just winging it. Rather, Jesus was discerning what the Father was already up to and then participating, Jesus was taking a role in it.

Now, maybe for God the Father to do that with Jesus is not too much of a surprise: He’s the son of God. But in today’s passage Jesus is saying that this is how we are meant to live with God as well, as

<sup>3</sup> So that when someone suggests God is some other way, we can say, “No, that doesn’t sound like Him. That’s not the God I know.”

friends whom He lets in on His business, what He is up to. So, through our spiritual relationship with God we are given the opportunity to learn how to discern what God is up to in our lives and the lives of others, and then participate - play a part - just as Jesus did in his earthly ministry. Jesus is loving us just as the father loved him. And this is good news because it means we are more than just God's servants, we are His friends. The good news is that Jesus loves us as the Father has loved Him, which means we are more than just God's servants, we are His friends.

And a part of this, a part of what God has invited us into (through Christ) that doesn't get highlighted enough is God's creative work. So we all know of God as the creator of everything that is, but this is not just a thing of the past. No, God continues to be in the business of creation, but now it is re-creating humans to be more like Him. As Tebbe & Sternke observe, in Genesis 1 we see God taking the world and giving it an order and purpose, to make the world a place for Him to come into relationship with humankind. But John's gospel presents Jesus as re-creating a new way of living for humankind to overcome our sin. Indeed, scripture says we become new creations, that we are "born again" into this new way of living.

Well, once we experience this new life in God through Christ, God then invites us as His friends to participate in this process of bringing about new creation in the lives of others. And there is an inherently creative element to it. Any of us who have seriously attempted to love others as Jesus did, in grace and truth, have probably recognized that it can require a level of creativity, imagination, and inventiveness unmatched by anything else in this world. Even more than acts of service; there are a lot of folks who can give their lives to serving the physical needs of others, but when it comes to doing more than that felt need - to being capable interpersonally relating to them in a way that loves them in grace & truth, there is nothing more challenging in this world than that. People can be successful in many arenas of life, but being able to love others like Jesus does, to love our spouses and kids and one another here in both grace and truth like Jesus does, it truly cannot be done *apart* from God. (Can I get an amen? // Lord, have mercy! Lord, help us!) But the good news is that Jesus loves us as the Father has loved Him, which means we are more than just God's servants, we are His friends.

And then, we add to that, that it is not just those we already feel love toward whom we are called to love as Jesus did; we are called to love our enemies like He did as well. You may have noticed Jesus says in verse 13, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." However, the creative power of God, His work that He invites us into, includes even learning how to love our enemies enough that we anticipate them becoming our friends.<sup>4</sup> For that is what Jesus did with us. God, whose wisdom is only exceeded by His love, deigned to love humankind who had rebelled against Him in our sin by sending His son, with the aim of making us no longer His enemies, but His friends. God loves us so much that when our hearts have declared "crucify him", he says "forgive them father." And that same God wants to change our hearts to do the same with the human beings we think the least of, whose agendas we fear the most, or with those whom we can't ever imagine being friends with. The good news is that we are more than just God's servants, we are His friends, and as we remain in Him we will find Him giving us the imagination and hearts to do this, to love enemies into friends.

Our passage closes with Jesus saying that "whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you" and then concluding, "This is my command: Love each other." So in a few moments I'm going to invite you to join in singing a prayer of sorts: asking Jesus, by His Spirit, to help us love beyond our present capacities.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> St Thomas Aquinas observed that "Our Lord came to die for his enemies, but he says that he is going to lay down his life for his friends, to show that by loving we are able to gain over our enemies, so that they who persecute us are by anticipation our friends."

## RESPONSE HYMN: "Help Us Accept Each Other"

Lyrics by Fred Kaan; Tune: "The Church's One Foundation"

1. Help us accept each other / as Christ accepted us; / teach us as sister, brother, / each person to embrace. / Be present, Lord, among us / and Bring us to believe: / we are ourselves accepted / and meant to love and live.
2. Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, / as in our daily life / we struggle to be human / and search for hope and faith. / Teach us to care for people, / for all - not just for some, / to love them as we find them / or as they may become.
3. Let your acceptance change us / so that we may be moved / in living situations / to do the truth in love; / to practice your acceptance / until we know by heart / the table of forgiveness / and laughter's healing art.
4. Lord, for today's encounters / with all who are in need, / who hunger for acceptance, / for justice and for bread, / we need new eyes for seeing, / new hands for holding on: / renew us with your Spirit; / Lord, free us, make us one!