

“The Best of Friends”

John 15: 9-17



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One of the more popular songs that continues to take the church around the world by storm is a 2003 song entitled, “Friend of God.” The words to the chorus are very simple. In fact, some have even called the song kind of empty, but they haven’t listened to the verses very carefully, nor have they heard with their hearts our scripture lesson. I have asked Andy to sing the verses and to have us sing the chorus. The verse sings, “Who am I that you are mindful of me, / That you hear me when I call? / Is it true that you are thinking of me? / How you love me, it’s amazing!” The chorus is simpler yet, as we sing one line three times over, “I am friend of God,” and finishes with “he calls me friend.” And Jesus said to his disciples in an intimate moment on the night before he was crucified, **“No longer do I call you servants, but instead I call you friends.”**

Now in syndication, the sitcom *Friends* made one of the longest runs in television history. Before it, a similar theme was at the center of a long-running sitcom called *Cheers*, in which the opening song sings “where everybody knows your name.” George Barna, the George Gallup of the church, says that churches often brag about how friendly they are: how they welcome people, how they smile and shake people’s hands, and even have greeters in the parking lot. And just to convince themselves that they are really friendly to visitors, they make the visitors stand up and be applauded or just as bad, let them be seated while all the home folks tower over them. When you consider that being made a spectacle of or embarrassing themselves are the biggest fears visitors have in coming to a church, you can see how that backfires. Barna says simply “People are not looking for friendliness as much as they are looking for friends” – people with whom they can have authentic and significant relationships that will help carry them through the ups and downs of their lives. Friendships are important, and are often the #1 indicator of how we will enjoy our lives in a certain community and how we will do at work or school.

I have always been fascinated by how friendships develop. My first best friend in elementary school was named Jonathan Kimmel. He was chunky and I was skinny. He called me “snake” and I called him “elephant.” In those jr. hi days, everyone had an animal nickname. A future linebacker for Penn State was named “horse” and our star defensive tackle was named “souss.” Elephant and snake, the best of friends. Last time I saw him, he was the thinner one. Jonathan and I “just happened” to meet in the band. He was first chair and I was second in the clarinet section. We sang together, played ping pong with other friends in his basement (surrounded by the aroma of barrels of sauerkraut), prayed together and later did concerts together. In ninth grade, after his parents were killed in a car wreck, he moved and changed schools. I don’t know where he lives now. But even before that, there was a trumpet player in the band who had a common thing with Jonathan. Tom Schwartz was fun and loved to do things that were outlandish and sometimes troublesome. After many years of playing in the band, singing in choir, being together, he had the gall to get married. I “just happened” to sit by his wife-to-be in an All-Region Band and introduced them. Then there was this beautiful blonde who came into my life. Tina and I “just happened” to meet in a United Methodist Church choir, she having arrived there just a few weeks before I arrived there as Associate Pastor and Youth Director. Isn’t it funny how these people “just happen” to come into your life and end up becoming “the best of friends?”

But these “chance meetings” don’t necessarily lead to great friendships. The key factor is spending time and investing ourselves in each other. So one of the questions we can be asking ourselves as we reach out to one another and to our community of Lubbock and surrounding areas is, “Are we willing to invest the time and effort in each other and more importantly, are we willing to invest the time and effort in people we have not yet befriended in order for friendship to develop? Becoming the best of friends is time-intensive, at times inconvenient, risky and a lot of times, worth it. Just ask Jesus.

The thing about friendships is that somebody always has to make the first move. Jesus says, “**As the father has loved me, so have I loved you.**” When Jesus was at his baptism and the heavens opened and the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, what did God say, “**This is my son whom I love, Son, in whom I am well pleased.**” Is there anything more powerful than for a child (a son or daughter) to hear that from a father or mother? Not in my life. It’s that kind of love that Jesus passes on to you. You are “so loved.” You are his pride and joy. I know you’re not perfect and so does the Lord, more than you do, and you still are loved. Drink that in for a moment.

Then Jesus says, “**Abide in my love.**” That means “take the time with me”, “stick around awhile.” Jesus just does not just offer you his Lordship (the demand that you and I obediently follow him and his ways), or a “get out of Hell free” card and a “get into heaven” one, but instead he offers us a relationship. And then he tells us how we best abide in his love, by doing what he commands. Is he saying, “I’m only going to love you when you please me and otherwise, I will withdraw my love?” There are people who love like that, what I call conditional lovers. Maybe we’re all like that to some degree. But here, Christ is inviting us through our obedience to return the love we have been give. It takes two or more for a relationship. It takes cooperation. Friends choose to cooperate and the result is good for them both. There is no doubt that when we live lives of obedience, then the vitality and the intimacy of our relationship with Christ increases. That’s why we need to be honest enough to ask the question whether the distance from God or the spiritual dryness we experience is due to disobedience and misaligned priorities. Sometimes the distance and the dryness is just a part of our spiritual walk, but many times there are things that are not right in our attitudes or behavior. Those “not right” things form a block between us and God, a block of our own making.

But what he commands is not complicated. “**This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.**” He has loved us as an act of obedience to his heavenly father and invites us to love one another and love those we have not yet known as an act of obedience to Christ. In so doing we cooperate with the love of our lives. Christ has offered his love first and sacrificially we are called to offer initiating and sacrificial love to one another and to our community. It’s not that we do it without counting the cost. Christ invites us to do what he did, count the cost and do it anyway.

Jesus says, “**No greater love has a man than he lay down his life for his friends.**” Biblical love is not just a feeling or an intention, it is sacrificial action. Sincerity is good, and passion is fine, but Biblical love in completeness is a verb. Now he invites us to follow his lead. Friends just do things together. There are people I know who claim to have lots of friends. You know the kind – name dropper friendships. If you’ve met them and they’re rich or famous, they’re your friends. But they never really talk or do anything together. Sometimes we do that with Christ. We sing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” and “I Love You, Lord”, but we don’t really talk much or do things together. Jesus invites us to be “the best of friends” in which we do what he does, we receive his sacrificial initiating love and then we pass on sacrificial initiating love.

And what is the payoff? I thought you’d never ask. In verse 11, Jesus says “**Your joy will be full.**” In verse 16, “**you will be fruitful,**” meaning you will be productive in ways that matter not just today, but tomorrow and forever. That would be enough if I had a guarantee that I could be joyful and meaningfully

productive. I could ask for no more. But there is more.

When we and the Lord become the best of friends, then a double miracle happens in which the one we love becomes a friend of ours, but even more, can become the best of friends with Christ along with us. And the result is this expanding family of love around the world. As I was preparing this sermon, I had a special moment that triggered the way this sermon began. Because I didn't know the song well, I turned to the video library known as "You Tube." The first recording was an African-American woman from Saddleback Community Church, who sang the song with such vitality that she was singing and jumping and still hitting the notes perfect. "I am friend of God. He calls me friend." Then I saw a recording of "Passion 2007" where Chris Tomlin and Israel Houghton, the writer of "Friend of God", sang the song. They, too, rocked the house, celebrating the greatest friendship of their lives. I couldn't help but notice the unity in the auditorium as they sang. Their friendship with Christ was leading them to a greater friendship with one another. Authentic friendship with Christ always does that.

But there is something else that happens when there is authentic friendship with Christ. It expands, like a mustard seed that is planted (though it is among the smaller of seeds) and grows into this large tree, says Jesus. Friendship with Jesus unites and it expands. I share with you my sacred moment of the week, a recording from a Youth With A Mission Conference held in Seoul, South Korea. It's not in English, but I think you'll understand it. It begins with a part of the song we didn't sing earlier, that sings, "God almighty, lord of glory / You have called me friend..."

That looked like joy to me. That looked like unity and an expanded family of love to me. It looked like something that would bring a smile to the heart of Jesus. Yes, it looked like something I often see here on both of our campuses. And through his word, and through you and me, Jesus says, **"These are my friends. These are my beloved in whom I am well pleased."**