

Who Is Your Friend? - April 24, 2016  
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### **Who Is Your Friend?**

St. John 15:9-17

Two boys collected a bucket of nuts underneath a huge walnut tree inside a cemetery on the outskirts of town. When the bucket was full, they sat down out of sight to divide the spoils.

"One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me," said one boy, as the other watched intently. Their bucket was so full that some of the nuts had spilled out and rolled toward the fence.

It was dusk, and another boy came riding along the road on his bicycle. As he passed, he thought he heard voices from inside the cemetery. He slowed down to investigate. Sure enough, he heard, "One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me."

The boy with the bike knew just what was happening, and his face went ghostly white. "Oh my," he shuddered. "It's Satan and the Lord dividing souls at the cemetery!"

He jumped back on his bike and rode off, desperately looking for a friend. Just around the bend he met an old, scowling man who hobbled along with a cane.

"Come with me, quick!" said the boy. "You won't believe what I heard! Satan and the Lord are down at the cemetery dividing up the souls!" The man said, "Beat it, kid, can't you see it's hard for me to walk?" When the boy insisted, though, the man hobbled to the cemetery. When they arrived at the fence, they heard, "One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me."

Ready to have a little fun, the old man whispered, "Boy, you've been tellin' the truth. Let's go inside, and see if we can see the Devil himself."

The child was horrified, but the old man was already taking his first step toward the gate. Then they heard, "Okay, that's the last of them. Now let's go get those two nuts by the fence, and we 'll be done." They say the old guy made it back to town five minutes ahead of the boy! More than likely, he was looking for a friend.

When looking for a friend what characteristics attract you initially? Social media,

Facebook especially, sets a current understanding of 'friend.' For example, on Facebook people who are friends of the friend of your friend can be called your friends too. But what are the qualities of a good friend?

We might suggest that a friend is someone who is trustworthy, kind, and gentle. Someone who is a blast to have around and is always up for a little fun. A friend accepts you for who you are and is loyal to a fault. So far, this a fair definition of your family dog! But a human friend is a bit more.

A true friend is all of the above as well as loving enough to be honest with you, and in gentleness will share with you the hard things that you need to hear. To do this correctly the friend needs to know your weaknesses and your strengths. With this knowledge your friend will never abuse you, but is someone you may always turn to in time of trouble. Friendship means forgiveness, a second chance. A true friend. knows you and still likes you! This is a powerful relationship!

In a word, we are called to be tender people. Brennan Manning writes, "Biblically, tenderness is what follows when someone reveals to you your own inner beauty, when you discover your belovedness, when you experience that you are deeply and sincerely liked by someone. If you communicate to me that you really like me, not just love me as a brother in Christ, that you take delight in me, then you open up to me the possibility of liking myself Your warmth withers my self-disdain and allows the possibility of self-worth."

In our Gospel lesson Jesus does not state that we are his neighbors, or his employees, or acquaintances. Jesus says, "You are my friends." To some of us this is quite comforting as we sang this morning. We can rely on Jesus, our friend. For others, the friendship of Jesus and not his judgment is so powerful that it allows us to be open and honest, and we find ourselves drawn into relationship with God through Jesus.

Viewing Jesus as Friend also allows us to break the hold of past misunderstanding of who God is. Some believe that God is an absentee landlord, a kind of authoritative God who is forever nitpicking at our lives, always finding fault and is unapproachable.

Seeing God in Christ Jesus as our Friend, however, revolutionizes prayer from trying to change an angry God to a personal, intimate conversation with our best friend. A discussion infused with trust and intimacy without the anxiety of being misunderstood

or the fear of not using the correct words. In our friendship with God we are covered by Grace because God knows us and loves us anyway.

I remember my mother commanding me many times to be friendly to our neighbors (I was a little introverted rascal, after all!). But she never had to say that about the people I loved. We generally don't need that motivation. What we do need is reassurance in living a life that screams to our friends that we truly love them

There is another way of looking at Jesus being our Friend: What does it mean for us to be a friends of Jesus? Jesus is careful to show the difference between servant and master and friend to friend relationships. The servant does what the master says how the master says, and when the master says, and is rewarded or reprimanded depending upon how she responds. Servants experience safety in being told exactly what to do and knowing the rules. They may not know 'everything' the master is doing but they don't have a choice either.

By contrast, a friend joins in owning the "big idea." He or she works together to bring about their shared vision in an environment of trust, openness and reliability.

The truth that we are friends of Jesus is radical? It's implications for how we live and do ministry together is truly mind-blowing. It thrusts us from self-centered religion, the kind of false theological thinking that asks: "Is what this ministry costs worth what I get out of in

To be a friend of Jesus means we have new, deeper definitions of words such as evangelism, stewardship, vision and service. Friends are invited to live in generosity and gratitude. When we are friends of Jesus we live in love as God's friends in our world. When we remember Jesus saying, "Love one another as I have love you," we understand this to be his invitation to live his values in our lives, our homes, our communities. This is our mission.

True friendship always begins with words of introduction and invitation. Friendship is about association and giving. God's story has always been about making new friends and I believe you and I are to be deliberate in offering others invitations to friendship with God. We call this evangelism. The life and mission of the church.

I firmly believe that any change in the quality of my life and yours comes only

when we have experienced a shift in our vision of reality.

God's love is so enormous there is room for everyone. All are invited. Friendship with God is never exclusive. God has no limits. God continues to reach out forever. And, unlike Facebook, God will never unfriend you. Alleluia. Amen.