



A Life of Friendship

“I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” John 15:15

Jesus was the model friend. He walked the difficult path of interdependence, giving and receiving as he went. Jesus was not an independent mover. He lived his life in community. He could often be found in the company of twelve chosen companions. Together they shared good times and bad times, meals and money, work and rest. Among the Twelve, Jesus had three closer friends: Peter, James, and John. Jesus invited these three men to share high points, like the transfiguration, and low points, like Gethsemane. Though he could have experienced these events alone, he included others in what was both sweet and costly. Jesus gave everything to his friends—his knowledge of God and his own life. Ultimately it was friendship with us that moved Jesus to embrace the cross.¹

In the New Testament a “friend” is immediately understood as “one who loves” — a definition that arises out of the very life, teaching, and example of Jesus. This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point. Jesus is our model for friendship because he loved without limits, and he makes it possible for us to live a life of friendship because we have been transformed by everything he shared with us.

As the Gospel of John shows, for Jesus, friendship is the ultimate relationship with God and one another. John 15:12-15 is a key passage in the Gospels for understanding what it means to live a life of friendship as Jesus’ disciples. Jesus enacts friendship throughout the Gospel, but these verses provide the words to describe who and what Jesus is as friend. Jesus is both the model and the source of friendship. As the *model of friendship*, he calls the disciples, including us today, to love as he has loved. As the *source of friendship*, he makes possible our own friendship through what he has given us.

¹ Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 175.

Friends of Jesus, Friends Like Jesus

Read John 15:9-17

For many modern readers, Jesus' definition of love and friendship in John 15:13—to lay down one's life for one's friend—is mostly unprecedented. Most contemporary language about friendship does not speak in terms of life and death. We celebrate our friends, we eat and drink with friends, we take vacations with friends, we are there when a friend is in need; but the modern definition of friendship is not someone who lays down his or her life on behalf of another.

Yet as Jesus speaks to the disciples' future throughout John 14-16, he makes an explicit connection between his life of love and the actions of a friend: *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”*

In other words, friends of Christ are those who love one another. Those who love one another are those who are willing to lay down their lives for one another. At the heart of friendship is love and sacrifice. Jesus models for the disciples the kind of loving relationship they must have. This love is best expressed as self-giving, sacrificial love — laying down our lives for our friends.

The disciples are no longer counted as “servants” but as “friends,” but they would not truly understand Jesus' meaning of friendship until they witnessed his death and were transformed by his resurrection. Indeed, Jesus willingly laid down his life, and we have never known a more profound and powerful act of love than this. As John writes, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16).

Through the cross and resurrection they would come to know what this “greater love” can accomplish in them through the unity of their abiding relationship with Jesus and the Father. For now, Jesus' words make it clear that the power to respond to his command to love one another comes from Jesus' own love and calling: “I have called you...; I have chosen you...; I have appointed you...” (vv. 15,16).

Jesus says the reason he calls them “friends” is because he has shared the riches of all he has with them in his relationship with God. “I have made known to you everything...” (John 15:15). Here Jesus' offer of the intimacy of friendship is stunning. He not only calls us his friends, but also invites us into friendship with God. The reality of friendship with Jesus offers transparency; to know Jesus is to know the heart of God.

The love that God has shown to Jesus is shown by Jesus to his disciples to demonstrate how they should show it to each other. When they love in this way, their love becomes filled with divine qualities. It is not just an emotional, warm feeling, but a conscious decision to speak openly and honestly just as Jesus has done, and to give freely out of the abundance of our own lives, and perhaps even our very life, for the sake of another—just as Jesus has done.

And what Jesus teaches he is already living. His whole life is an incarnation of the ideal of friendship—and in the gift of his life for others he not only embodies friendship's highest attribute, but also defines the meaning and extent of “love.” His willingness to lay down his life on then cross moves the teaching of friendship in John 15:13 from a philosophical ideal to an embodied promise and gift.

Friends Become Witnesses

For Jesus, his own act of life-giving friendship is not the end of the story. Jesus does not merely talk the language of friendship, he lives out his life and death as a friend and he commands that his followers do the same (John 15:12-14). The commandment to love as Jesus has loved may be the most radical words of the Gospel because it claims that the love that enabled Jesus to lay down his life for his friends is not unique to him. This love can be replicated and embodied over and over again by his followers.

Read Acts 1:1-11. At the beginning of Acts, Luke reminds us that the 24 chapters of his Gospel lays out “all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ...” up to and including his death, resurrection, and ascension. We have within the Gospels the living revelation of the character of God in the relationships, the teaching, the parables, and challenges of the life of Jesus.

But here, in these opening sentences of this second act, Luke lays out the direction the story will take as the disciples—those whom Jesus calls his friends—take up the mantle of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and speak of the good news of God throughout the world. Acts show how people *act* in response to all that Jesus did and taught—and all the Spirit empowers them to do—where they are and wherever God calls them to go.

Jesus transformed this community through his love so that they can continue his acts of love. It was to be embodied and shared to the ends of the earth by his followers. These friends of Jesus now move out into the world and speak about the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. As they speak openly and honestly about God and lay down their own lives through acts of love and service, they offer the same friendship to others as Jesus has extended to them. Their friendship with Jesus has transformed them into witnesses of God’s love.

We, too, are called by Jesus to be his witnesses today, enacting the same friendship in the world around us. Jesus has been the ultimate friend—he gave his life in love for us. Now it is our turn to be Jesus’ friend, which means that we love one another as he has loved us.

Living The Friendship That Jesus Makes Possible²

We have been changed by Jesus’ words, actions, and example, and this transformation lies at the heart of Christian friendship. Through friendship *we come to know God* and through friendship *we enact the love of God*. We can risk being friends because Jesus has been a friend to us.

A life of friendship is grounded in relationship to God and a commitment to one another. As Jesus demonstrated, friendship requires intentionality and self-giving love. Friends mutually and naturally supply support, sharing, counsel, joy, encouragement, growth, and a sense of being uniquely chosen and valued. Ultimately, friends want their relationships to reflect the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus has invited us into this divine community, so friends of Jesus invite others into this same shared love.

Friendship also makes a life of discipleship to Jesus possible. Friends help us stay committed to what is best and most promising. Friends help us persevere. There is no way our journey could be undertaken, sustained, and completed without the guidance and support of friends making that same journey with us. If the Christian life is an ongoing training in the ways of Jesus, it absolutely requires certain kinds of relationships and communities in which such training can occur. Every real friendship and any true community contributes to our growth because friendships draw us out of ourselves and teach us to care for others for their own sake.

² Adapted from the article “I Have Called You Friends” by Gail O’Day.

Moreover, if we take Jesus' commandment to love seriously, and if we long to be called "friend" by Jesus, then **our life's vocation as disciples is to give love freely and generously without counting the cost and without worrying about who is on the receiving end of our love.** Because this, too, is how Jesus loved. Jesus loved Judas, even though Jesus was well aware that Judas would betray him (John 6:64, 70-71). Jesus did not exclude Judas from the circle of his love, but loved him in the same ways that he loved all of his other followers, even washing his feet just hours before he would be betrayed. What counts most is the embodiment of God's love in the world, not the character of those who receive this love.

At some point in any real friendship, love must be expressed through forgiveness. We care for our friends, but they can hurt and disappoint us, sometimes deeply. Friends may seek our good, but they can also fail us, betray us, or neglect us. There can be periods in a friendship when even our closest friends seem more like strangers than friends—or when we seem that way to them. We do fail one another. We do fall short. And we can be skilled at hurting our friends precisely because we know them so well. If friendships are to survive such moments, friends must be committed to learning and practicing the virtues of forgiveness and reconciliation. Being able to forgive is an important element of any friendship because it signals that friends are willing to work through the hard moments of the relationship in order to restore its original grace.

Given the practices mentioned above, Jesus' commandment to love as he has loved might feel unattainable were it not for the character of his friendship with us. Indeed, because Jesus, in his life and death—and in his words and deeds—showed and told his followers "everything" about God's love, his followers' relationship to the world and to one another was forever changed. Jesus' openness and transparency is a model of how we are to treat one another. It also provides the well-spring that makes our acts of friendship possible. Jesus' revelation of God's love has made human life more holy because he has treated his followers as full partners in his relationship with God. His friendship is more than the model for human love and friendship; Jesus' friendship becomes the source of his disciples' capacity for friendship.

Ultimately, the challenge for Jesus' disciples is to enact and embody friendship as Jesus has done to us. Friends of Jesus are friends *like* Jesus—they are known by their love. We know how Jesus has been a friend; we are called to see what kind of friends we can become.

"When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares. Friendship is being with the other in joy and sorrow, even when we cannot increase the joy or decrease the sorrow. It is a unity of souls that gives nobility and sincerity to love. Friendship makes all of life shine brightly. Blessed are those who lay down their lives for their friends."

— Henri Nouwen

Discussion

1. Who are some friends who have made you better, and in what ways? Are there ways you have made your friends better?
2. What are the necessary qualities of good friendships? How do you think technology has affected our understanding and experience of friendship? Why do you think good friendships are hard to find?
3. How does Jesus' teaching and example challenge our modern definitions of a "friend"? How has this lesson challenged your own definition of a friend?
4. In John's Gospel, Jesus calls his disciples "friends," and in Acts he calls them his "witnesses." What is the relationship between our identity as Jesus' friends and Jesus' witnesses? How do these titles, and the responsibility they carry, work together?
5. Thomas Merton writes, *"If you want to know me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat...but ask me what I am living for, in detail, ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for."*
 - Friends are those rare people who tell us who we are; who ask us what we are living for; and who help us overcome the things which keep us from that purpose. Who are those people in your life today, and what difference has it made in your walk with Christ?
 - Are you this person for someone? What has this experience been like for you? Prayerfully consider how you can cultivate and nurture this friendship in the days ahead.