

John 15:9-12 6 Easter Pastor Bill Uetricht 5/06/18

According to the General Social Survey, the number of Americans who say that they have no close friends has nearly tripled in recent decades. “Zero” is the most common response to a question in that survey about how many confidants people have. Men, in particular, are known for having few friends. We often negotiate this thing called life on our own, through the wisdom that we ourselves are able to generate. We men, we humans, honestly, can be a lonely bunch. This is really true for pastors. Although I feel blessed in this regard, many of us clergy are friendless. We all are so busy achieving, working, performing, tending to the church, relating on social media that we often don’t have time for friends.

Social psychologists these days are saying that our physical health may be suffering because of our lack of friends. They are arguing that we need between three and five good friends for optimal well-being. Evolutionary psychologist Dr. Robin Dunbar says that “whether you’re laughing with your pal or feeling him or her touch your shoulder in sympathy, the resulting rush of endorphins seems to tune up your immune system, protecting you from disease.”

Probably one of the reasons that folks who are connected to a faith community like this one live longer is that they have friends. Not only are the pastors and counselors telling us about the significance of friendships, the scientists are as well.

Jesus in today’s gospel reading tells his disciples who are in a funk because they know that he is about to die: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.” He calls them friends because he has revealed to them not only what he is up to but what God is up to. He has let them in on the big things, the deep things. He has been intimate with them. He hasn’t kept things back from them. He has been open with them, and what God is doing in him has been shared with them. They are no longer servants, but friends.

Jesus doesn't operate in a hierarchical universe, an up and down world—a world that defines life on the basis of who's on top. This reality may have contributed to some of the struggles that the very early church experienced. They may have been a challenge to cultures that depended so greatly on hierarchies. A community that spoke about the breaking down of the hierarchies that exist between men and women, slaves and free people, Jews and non-Jews may have threatened religious insiders as well as foreign governments that depended upon everybody knowing who was in charge. When you start living as if we are all in this together, as if we are all friends rather than bosses and the bossed, community looks very different, strange to people who need hierarchies.

Now I say all of this recognizing that communities need structures and that their well-being often depends upon someone taking responsibility. Individuals in communities are given roles to play. And chaos often occurs when people don't carry out those roles. I have often said, "Someone has got to be in charge." We need good leaders. Someone will need to make decisions that if they are not decided on will result in nothing but bedlam. But hear this, the need for structure and the need for leadership does not have to be defined as a need for hierarchy. Hierarchy suggests that in *essence* we are very different people. I am of the conviction that some religious traditions have gotten into big trouble as they have defined the people who are in their leadership as somehow in *essence* different from those who are not in leadership. It's not just a matter of role; it's a matter of who that person is in his or her very being. That is for me a recipe for terrible loneliness.

But don't think that that loneliness only occurs in traditions that are so hierarchically defined. Leaders in many places—the church, politics, business—will report loneliness because of hierarchical thinking. Sometimes it is they themselves who put themselves on the top of the pile. They have needs to control or boss people around. But sometimes, they are placed there by the people who are thought to be

under them. The followers have needs for leaders to be up there, to be on a different level. These followers, many times for psychological reasons, need to keep others at a distance, to keep them in hierarchies.

“I do not call you servants any longer; but I have called you ‘friends.’ For Jesus, it is not about hierarchy, even if he is definitely the leader. The disciples of Jesus are the *friends* of Jesus. We can say that we are the friends of God. Now don’t think that means that nobody is in charge. We know better. In relationship to God, we aren’t in charge. But nonetheless, we *are* the friends of God. We are invited into a relationship of great intimacy. What God is ultimately up to has been revealed, the gospel of John would tell us, in the person of Jesus. We have been let in on the intimate details of what runs the universe, what life is all about. And what life is all about, the living, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveals, is love. Love is the purpose of living. And if love is the purpose, the source, and the goal of life, then we live in light of an intimacy that makes us all friends.

We *are* the friends of God. And we are so because God has chosen us as his friends, Jesus tells us. It’s not so much that we have chosen God. And that is the message that is so often heard in contemporary American religion. “Choose God; choose Jesus. Make him your personal Lord and Savior. And if you don’t, well, you are heading off to hell.” The friendship we have with God comes because chooses us. We live in light of a love that is given to us. The energy of the universe is an energy that flows *to* us and through us. It is not manufactured by us. We live in light of a love that, first of all, is a gift. Listen to Jesus in John today: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Jesus is the recipient of love from God, and he has passed it on to his friends. He invites his friends to live within that love and to pass it on to other friends.

Now we might at this point come to the conclusion that life is about some kind of mushy feeling that we call love. We in American twenty-first century culture often define love simply as a feeling. And frequently, when we don’t feel it, we say that it isn’t there. Jesus, like

many ancients, didn't have that view of love. For Jesus, love isn't just something you feel; it is something you do. As he commands his friends to love, he says: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." In the Gospel of John, Jesus is about ready to lay down his life for his friends, is about ready to die. In this Gospel, the cross of Jesus is a gift of love for the sake of the world. But let's face it. The cross is no easy gift. It comes with a great cost. To love like Jesus is to be willing to pay a big cost. It is to lay down your life for the sake of other people. Friends who love their friends give up themselves for the sake of their friends. Parents who love give up themselves for the sake of their kids. Pastors who love give up themselves for the sake of their flock. Leaders who lead and followers who follow give up themselves for the sake of one another.

To live as friends with Jesus and with one another is not an easy calling. It often involves getting over ourselves, the hardest getting over that we have to do. Surprisingly, that kind of getting over is what brings us to the deep joy that Jesus wants for his friends today. True love is not easy. True love dies to the self. But on the other side of death is resurrection. On the other side of death is a new-found joy.

Herb Brokering, the author of the last song we will sing today, tells this story: "Once there was a minister who counseled married people who were breaking up. He always had them join hands and do a hand lock. They pressed and pushed against each other in the dark until the hand lock broke. They would fall into each other's arms exhausted and laughing. Then he would always ask them, 'Do you give up?' They each answered, 'I do.' Then he would pronounce them husband and wife all over again."

Do you give up? True love is letting go. True love is letting go of yourself. That's the kind of love that Jesus has for his friends. That's the kind of love that God has for the world. That's the kind of love that makes us all friends. And we all so desperately need friends.