

Growing up friends were sometimes hard to come by. Because my father was a diplomat we moved around every two to four years, which meant every two to four years I was going to a new school, in a new country, with new kids to get to know and hopefully befriend. I was almost always the new kid. When I was younger this wasn't such a big deal, young kids generally have a tendency to make friends easily, kids will gravitate towards each other, and just begin to play with one another. It is remarkable to watch young children so readily make friends, so readily trust one another and immediately rejoice in each other's company. I witness this daily when I take my daughter to the park: there is no hesitation, once she knows a boy's or girl's name they are off to the races. As you grow older friendship becomes harder, something I experienced all too well growing up abroad. We eventually develop distinct likes and dislikes, we develop more unique and specific personalities and gone are the days of being friends with everyone on the school yard. Often when I would move to a new country it would take me a considerable amount of time to make friends, and towards middle school and high school the number of people that I would call a friend, rather than just a buddy or an acquaintance became smaller and smaller. As we grow older we actually start to think about what it means to be friends with someone, we begin to choose our friends. Don't get me wrong there is nothing wrong with the way children make friends, in fact there is something beautiful, something even divine in the absolute trust and love that children can show to one another, but I think that as we get older friendship becomes deeper; friendship truly becomes an expression of deep love and affection for another.

Our passage from the Gospel of John today deal very specifically with friendship, and what it means and why we need it. Often when we read through the passages of John's Gospel, and the great discourses Jesus has with his disciples we can get caught on the word love. As David spoke about last week, there are many kinds of love, but so often when we hear the word love in our culture we immediately think of romantic love or perhaps secondarily familial love between a parent and child. This passage is about neither of those, this passage is squarely about what we might call friendship-love, the love between friends. Jesus mentions the word friends three times in this short passage, and so I want unpack what the Bible is teaching us about friendship in this passage.

First and foremost this passage answers for us the question why do we need friendship. I am struck when someone says to me that they don't need friends, that they are fine on their own. Despite my challenges making friends at times growing up, I always knew that friendship was vital: friends make you laugh, they support you through troubles, they share common interests with you and so on. Friendship is important but the question still lingers why we need it. In my mind this passage from John teaches us that we need friendship because we're like God, and we need God. At the very beginning of the passage Jesus says As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Friendship love, is a direct result of God the Father's friendship love for the Son. This is like Jesus telling us that from the beginning he and the Father have been eternally friends. If we think about the relationship of the Trinity in terms of friendship, then from all eternity there was friendship, even before the creation of the world friendship existed in the very nature of God. If friendship is an eternal quality of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and since the Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God, then it stands to reason that friendship is an essential part of what it means to be human. We can see this in the story of Adam in the garden: When God creates Adam he sees that he is lonely, he sees that even though Adam is perfect in every way he needs to be able to have friendship, and so God creates Eve, to be Adam's friend, to ensure that the eternal quality of friendship is met in God's children.

While the horizontal, human to human, dimension of friendship, is vitally important in this passage, Jesus is also stressing the vertical dimension of friendship, or friendship between us and God. In this passage, and in our passage last week, Jesus tells us that to be fruitful we must abide in the love of God, we must live in the friendship God extends to us. Words like fruitfulness and abiding can be tricky to grasp, in our daily life, and so Jesus offers us a glimpse at what it might mean to abide in God's love and be fruitful. In the middle of our passage Jesus says that he has said these things so that his joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete. Experiencing the joy of God and living into that joy, is what Jesus means by being fruitful. Joy, that deep rooted appreciation and elation which comes from meaningful relationships, which comes from experiences of Grace and God. With both our friendship with other people and with God, joy is the ultimate fruit of friendship.

This begins to answer the question why do we need friendship, but the second question that arises is what Jesus means by friendship, what are the key markers between friendship and other relationships. There are three key verses in this passage which provide us elements of what friendship is: In verse 16 Jesus says he chose the disciples to be his friends, in verse 15 friendship shows that friendship requires trust and sharing and finally in verses 12-13,

Jesus tells us the key to friendship is that you love another and that the epitome of love is to lay down one's life for one's friends. We'll call these three elements: choice, candor and constancy.

Friendship requires choice, we choose who are friends are, we choose who we want to share that friendship love with. In verse 16 of our passage, Jesus said that he chose the disciples, that he chose them to be his friends. Choice is an essential part of friendship, we can't be friends with someone if we or they don't choose to be, and this is particularly true of adult friendships. As children friendship is taken up and dropped freely, but there is depth to a friendship that results from choice, that results from the choice to love another. Largely because of my upbringing I don't have life-long friends, if it weren't for Facebook I would probably not be in touch with anyone before my time in university. But that doesn't mean I don't have meaningful and deep friendships, in fact I have a number of deep and meaningful friendships from both my undergraduate and master's degrees, and an important component of those friendships is that we chose to be friends, we chose to commit time and effort to develop lasting and deep friendships.

So friendship requires choice, but it also requires candor or honesty and trust. Friends always let you in, they share their feelings, their knowledge, their plans, their hopes and their dreams with friends. Jesus says to his disciples in verse 15 "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, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my father." The mark of true friendship is the ability and willingness to share the most intimate and personal details, our hopes our fears with another. I'm sure you have probably experienced a situation where someone just wasn't willing to ever let their guard down, just wasn't ever able to let you into their life and you may have been friendly with them, you might even have spent considerable time with them, but they were probably never a close friend. Jesus highlights this candor, this honesty and trust as one of the markers of true friendship.

So we have friendship requiring choice and candor. The third and final element of friendship love that Jesus highlights in this passage is constancy, or in other words friends never let you down. Perhaps the defining division between good deep friendships and friendly acquaintances is whether or not someone is willing to drop everything when you really need them, when you're in crisis. Jesus says that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." We aren't likely to be in a position where we have to lay down our life for a friend, but we can and do lay down other things for friends. For true friends we often lay down our own ways of doing things, we can lay down our convenience, our schedules, we can lay down money or time when a friend truly needs us.

So friendship is about choice: choosing the people we love, and consider friends; friendship is about candor: letting friends into your confidence, trusting and being honest with other people; and finally friendship is about constancy: never letting out friends down, always being there for them in times of need or trouble. And the remarkable thing about this is that Jesus declares that we are his friends, Jesus declares that he chooses us, Jesus declares that he lets us into his confidence and finally Jesus declares that he was willing to show the ultimate test of friendship and lay down his life for us, his friends.

Jesus invites each of us into friendship with him, he invites each of us to experience true and perfect friendship with God. Like the disciples before us we can choose to remain his servants, we can choose not to accept Jesus' friendship, we can choose not to acknowledge what Jesus has done for us on the Cross and in his Resurrection. We can choose not to enter his confidence and trust. But that is our choice, not God's. Jesus declares that the greatest act of friendship is to lay down one's life for one's friends, and we know that on the Cross Jesus did just that, that on the Cross Jesus died so that the sins of the whole world would not bar us from relationship with God. In his death and resurrection Jesus has declared each and every one of us his friend, he has invited each and every one of us into the friendship love that Jesus shares with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. While Jesus offers us a template for what it means to share friendship love with other people, a template we can use in our friendships here on earth, he also offers us so much more, he offers us a perfect friend, who chooses us, a perfect friend who is candid with us, and a perfect friend who is constantly there for us, even when our earthly friends might fail us.

We have a choice to make, we can go on with our lives serving God, we can go on with our lives deciding to never enter the friendship love that God offers us, or we can acknowledge what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we can take hold of the love and mercy and forgiveness of God that he wrought on the Cross, and enter into that divine friendship. My hope for us all is that we might choose the candor and constancy of God, my hope is that we might choose to accept the friendship of God, my hope is that we might experience the fruit of God's joy being made complete in each of us.

Let us pray.