

WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS

John 15:9-17

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Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 03.23.2003–“Friend Day”

Welcome to the Plymouth Church of Christ! We are honored by your presence, and we are hopeful that our worship together will glorify God and bless our lives. We live in eventful times. It is my wish that we will lift our voices in persistent and passionate prayer to the God who is the creator of this world and the controller of its ultimate destiny. Between the times of creation and consummation, we pray that His Will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (B.C. 384–322) wrote: “What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.” “Friends are the sunshine of life”—so said American author and diplomat John Hay (A.D. 1838–1905). Jacques Delille (A.D. 1738–1813), French churchman and poet, observed: “Fate chooses our relatives, we choose our friends.” “The only way to have a friend is to be one”—so advised Ralph Waldo Emerson (A.D. 1803–1882), American writer and philosopher. Woodrow Wilson (A.D. 1856–1924), 28th President of the United States, stated: “Friendship is the only cement that will ever hold the world together.” And it was Indira Gandhi (A.D. 1917–1984), former Prime Minister of India, who remarked: “You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist.”

On a less serious note, “A friend will see you through after others see you are through.” “A good friend is like a tube of toothpaste—comes through in a tight squeeze.” “A trusted friend thinks you’re a good egg—even though you might be slightly cracked.” “If you really want your friends to remember you, give them something cheap.” And how could I *not* quote the quip of Irish poet, dramatist, and novelist Oscar Wilde (A.D. 1854–1900): “A true friend stabs you in the front.”

Finally, here is a sampling of proverbial sayings. From the biblical book of Proverbs: “A friend loves at all times” (Prov 17:17). English Proverb: “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” French Proverb: “A faithful friend is an image of God.” Spanish Proverb: “Those who possess good friends are truly rich.” Hasidic Proverb: “One who looks for a

friend without faults will have none.” Chinese Proverb (that is a little different): “Do not use a hatchet to remove a fly from your friend’s forehead.”

Turn with me, please, to the Gospel of John, chapter 15 (page 935 in the Pew Bible). In chapters 13 through 17 the setting is what we call “the Last Supper”: before His betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus speaks to His disciples and prays to His father. Chapters 13 and 14 set the stage for a farewell conversation between Jesus and the disciples. He is going where they cannot come, at least for now, and so His words take on the character of urgent instruction for what life is like without His physical presence. Although He is leaving, Jesus promises not to leave His disciples orphaned. In the first eight verses of chapter 15, Jesus draws from the historical imagery of Israel as God’s special vine and declares to His disciples, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (v. 5). We come now to verses 9 through 17 of chapter 15. I will be reading from the New International Version. Please, follow along with me.

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other (John 15:9-17).

Friendship is an all too scarce commodity in our world. The spirit of competition coupled with rugged individualism and set within a mobile society tends to fragment our lives and to isolate us from any sense of community. Making and sustaining friends is not easy. Unfortunately, the word “friend” is often reduced to “acquaintance,” and the ingredients of a deep relationship, such as empathy, support, and mutual struggle, are lost. It is striking, then, to hear Jesus lift up the language of friendship to express the nature of His relationship with His followers. “I no longer call you servants . . . instead, I have called you friends” (v. 15). What can we learn from the text we just read?

First, we learn that to be a friend of Jesus means to be loved and to be chosen. The dramatic definition of love given in v. 13—“to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”—while stated in a universal way, is rooted in the supreme sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. Jesus died for all of us who are present here today, and for all who are *not* present here today. We are deeply indebted to the One who now calls us friends. But do not think, for one minute, that this friendship results from mutual attraction. Jesus pointedly proclaims, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (v. 16). There are at least three practical, and perhaps painful, implications of being chosen by Jesus. (1) There is no room for a consumerist attitude toward this friendship. We are not in a position to dictate when and where we will act like friends, nor are we in a position to demand this or that benefit from the relationship to satisfy our own needs. (2) There is no justification for being puffed up with pride. We are not chosen for privilege, but for productiveness—for bearing fruit to the glory of God. (3) There is safety and security in Jesus. As long as we do not choose to reject His choosing, no one and no thing can snatch us from His hand. To be a friend of Jesus is to be loved and chosen.

Second, we learn that to be a friend of Jesus means to know what is going on. “I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (v. 15). What distinguishes servants from friends is that friends have been let in on the plans. The disciples are told about the coming crisis and Jesus’ impending departure. They are not kept in the dark about what is happening and what is going to happen. It is said of Henry Ford that he called on his executives in their offices when he wanted to confer with them on ways of ironing out problems in the organization. They greatly appreciated his courtesy. He could have summoned them to his office, but instead he called on them. One day, one of his associates said to him, “I wonder that in such a big organization you go out to call on people. Wouldn’t it save time if you asked them to call on you?” “No it would not,” said Henry Ford, “When I’m through I can get out of their offices faster than I can get them out of mine!” His executives were not slaves, but they certainly did not know what their master was doing. It was the saving of time, not courtesy to his associates, that dictated his action. Through the Gospel of John, we are “let in on” what God “is up to”; for it is the story of the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. What makes us friends of Jesus is that we have been captured by the story

and have committed ourselves to Jesus, the Word of God. To be a friend of Jesus is to know what is going on.

Third, we learn that to be a friend of Jesus means to obey His commands and to love as He has loved. Verse 9 provides “the chain of command”: “As the Father has loved me [Jesus], so I [Jesus] have loved you [the disciples]; abide/remain in My love.” Twice in our text, we find the command: “Love each other” (vv. 12, 17; cf. 13:34). John’s Gospel repeatedly speaks of love as a commandment, a notion that sounds a bit strange to us. Our common conception of love would forbid its being an action done or a feeling conjured up under duress. Philosophers and theologians have discussed and debated different types of love. For example, there is what Aristotle (B.C. 384–322) and Aquinas (A.D. 1225–1274) called *benevolentia* (“benevolence”), the love that wills another’s good. It comes from the stance of one situated above. In contrast is the love of desire, *concupiscentia* (“concupiscence”), in which one hopes to gain something from the person loved. Its primary motive is the need of fulfillment. Better than both of these is *amicitia* (“amiable-ness”; “amicable-ness”), the love of friendship. This love was ranked as the highest of the three and comes closest to capturing the concept of *agape* love in the New Testament. The love commanded by Jesus is the love that is *for* another and acts *for* another, even at the sacrifice of oneself. The supreme act of such love is to sacrifice one’s own life for the one loved, and the standard for such love is God’s love for the world expressed through Jesus Christ: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). This is the love that we are to have for one another. Here, at the Plymouth Church of Christ, we are committed to such love. On our printed bulletin, you will see the mission statement of this church: “Loving others as Jesus loves us.” Jesus is our Savior and our Standard. Unlike Him, we admit that we are not perfect in our love; however, by His strength, we strive to become more and more loving like Him. “Loving others as Jesus loves us.” Professing this is not difficult; practicing it is a never-ending challenge. To be a friend of Jesus is to obey His commands and love as He loved.

In the section of scripture that follows what we have studied, verses 18-25, the text is realistic about the world’s response to our friendship with Jesus. The dominant verb “love” gives way to “hate.” I am reminded of the Greek Proverb: “The one who has no

enemies has no friends.”

I have a confession to make. Technically speaking, the statement “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”—the theme for today’s worship—can be misleading or, at the least, it requires one to read “the fine print.” Please don’t leave here and say, “The preacher at Plymouth pulled a bait-and-switch on us!” The statement does express what is true. But, *technically speaking*, in the passage we have studied, the disciples are said to be Jesus’ friends, but Jesus is not said to be their friend. In fact, nowhere in the Bible is either God the Father or Jesus the Son ever said to be the friend of anyone. Abraham may be called the friend of God (Isa 41:8), but the Scriptures do not call God the friend of Abraham. On one occasion, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus uses the expression “my friends” rather loosely (Luke 12:4), but nowhere does someone say “my friend” to Jesus. *My point is this: if we are not careful, we can develop a chummy view of friendship that distorts the distinction between Jesus as the Savior and us as those who need to be saved.* Normally, we think of friendship as a reciprocal relationship of affection. But this goes only so far with Jesus, for our relationship with Him is *not* 100% reciprocal. For one thing, He has taken all of the initiative! “You did not choose me,” says Jesus, “but I chose you” (v. 16). Furthermore, Jesus states, “You are my friends if you do what I command” (v. 14). A servant, like a friend of Jesus, must do what they are told. The distinction is not between obeying and not obeying; the distinction is between understanding and not understanding. The servant operates in the dark, whereas the friend has been let in on what is going on. We are not friends because we obey; we obey because we are friends.

The question, then, that confronts, convicts, and challenges each one of us is *not*, “Is Jesus my friend?” Rather, the question *is*, “Am I Jesus’ friend?” Am I a friend of Jesus? It is much easier, and far more comfortable, to sing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” that it would be to sing “What a Friend I Am to Jesus”! *Am I a friend of Jesus?*

In the Churches of Christ, it is our tradition to conclude most sermons by “extending the invitation.” In just a moment, we are all going to stand and sing a song (*Amazing Grace*). The singing of this song is an invitation—an opportunity—for anyone who chooses to come forward to the front pew and make their request known to one of our elders or ministers. Perhaps you want to learn more about Jesus and His church. Perhaps you desire that this congregation pray for you. Perhaps there are other matters with which we

can help you. Whatever your need may be, feel free to come, as together we stand and sing.

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What a Friend We Have in Jesus, lyrics by Joseph M. Scriven (1855), music by Charles C. Converse (1868).