

True Friendship

May 9, 2021

John 15: 9-17

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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 that I have heard from my Father.

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

1st John 5: 1-5

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.

And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴ for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵ Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?



As we delve into the idea of true friendship this morning, we begin with a question: What qualities or characteristics make your best friend your best friend?...

I asked this same question in our church's Facebook group this past week and here were some of the answers I received from that group: always willing to listen; trust; she loves me very much; honesty; never judgmental; being known in my good and bad and still liked; accountability or, 'no filter trust'; loves me through truth (willing to have hard conversations); nourishes us; caring; will be there for me...

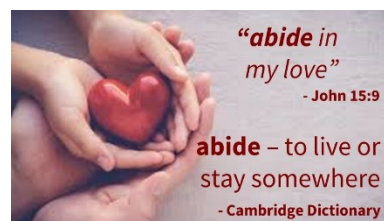


True friends are the people who would do anything for us, who are selfless, who are loyal, who will sacrifice for us. A true friend places our needs above their own and shows genuine affection for us in all circumstances. In today's passages we see how and why Jesus chooses us to be true friends and how we are connected to God through our relationship with Jesus. As we begin, let us pray...

Last Sunday we talked about the call to abide in Christ. The challenge was to practice or perhaps to find spiritual disciplines that connect us to Jesus. This was an internal or personal challenge. The underlying idea was that as we spend time in prayer, meditation, reflection, reading, and/or study, we become more deeply connected to Jesus. Today's first passage, from John 15, extends this idea and helps us to begin to see how abiding in Christ will affect or impact our lives.

Please turn with me to John 15, beginning in verse nine.

Jesus begins by inviting us to *"abide in my love"*. God loves Jesus, Jesus loves us, abide in his love. According to the Cambridge dictionary, to abide means *"to live or stay somewhere"*. Using that definition, Jesus is inviting us to live or to stay in his love. There is a constancy to Jesus' invitation. It is not an invitation to come and go



as we please. Imagine if that was how your relationship with you best friend functioned. They would not be your best friend for too long, would they? The invitation Jesus gives is one that is permanent, one that is a 24/7 relationship.

In today's first passage we shift to the external. In verse ten Jesus connects abiding in his love to keeping his commandments. Just as Jesus abided in God's love by following God's will and ways, we too are to keep Jesus' commandments as a demonstration of how we abide in his love. In the following verse Jesus explains why he is instructing us to walk this way. In verse eleven Jesus says, *"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete"*. I truly believe that we know the fullest joy in this life when we are walking step in step with Jesus, abiding in his love, following his commandments. There our joy is made complete.



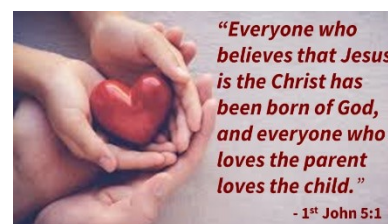
Throughout his ministry Jesus was consistent in how he summed up the whole of the Hebrew scriptures. He summed it up in the singular phrase: "Love one another". This was the theme and heart of Jesus' whole ministry. This theme is reiterated in verse twelve. Here Jesus commands us to *"love one another as I have loved you"*. What this looks like is further illustrated in verse thirteen: *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"*. This 'best friend' characteristic is one that Jesus would live out in John 19 when he went to the cross for you and me. Almost all of the disciples would reciprocate this act of sacrifice, most dying for the sake of the kingdom. The willingness to offer oneself, to give of oneself for the other is what makes us 'friends' with Jesus. Jesus calls on the disciples and followers today to practice sacrificial love for one another. For Jesus, true friendship involves a willingness to serve and sacrifice for the good of the other.

Next Jesus addresses the cultural master-servant or teacher-student relationship. The common expectation would be to see ones' disciples as students rather than as friends. Many saw and expected the religious leaders and teachers as the one with the upper hand in the power dynamics and social structures. In that culture, Jesus would be seen as a master or teacher, as a rabbi. Traditionally his disciples and other followers would be seen as lower than or less than Jesus. Abiding in Christ and in his love changes that dynamic for the disciples and followers of Jesus. Even today, a servant does not normally know what his master is doing, the teacher knows more than the students.

Not that this is not true in the case of Jesus and the disciples and followers. Jesus is far superior to them. Yet Jesus still changes the dynamics of the relationship. Jesus is intentionally embodying sacrificial selflessness to those who would continue the ministry. Jesus explains this by saying that since he has made known to his followers *"everything that I have heard from my Father"* he can now call them and us 'friends'. So, for you and for me, when we abide in Christ, when we follow his commands, we are no longer servants but friends. One thing I thought of when I considered the opening question was this: best friends can finish each other's sentences. When we abide in Christ and in his love, we get to the point where this happens. Sometimes the Holy Spirit will begin to prompt us to say or do something and before the prompting is even finished, we already know what to do or say. That is when we are in tune with our best friend Jesus.

Turning to 1st John 5, we see this idea of following Jesus' commands to our relationship with God. In verse one John writes,

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child". Faith in Jesus as the Christ or Messiah



comes only to those who are born of or from God. This is the idea of being born again or being made into a new creation when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. John then draws a parallel to loving God and loving Jesus. There is an implication here that if one truly loves God, then one will love his son as well. In the same way as Jesus did in our opening passage, John connects loving God to obeying God's commands. The same relationship exists here: when we love God, we obey his commands.



John also connects into the joy found in abiding in and loving God. John reminds us that God's commandments are not "*burdensome*" at all. Even more so, John reminds us that when we are born of God, we are able

to conquer the world. When we abide in Christ, we are not held captive to the pleasures and temptations of the world. Through faith we can conquer these things and can live as Jesus did during his time on earth – free from the cares of the world, not caring what others thought, totally focused on pleasing God in all he did and said. When I have ventured into this space, I have found it a joyous place to be. But it is not a place I find myself often. The pull of the world is always there. We seem inundated with the cares of the world in many ways. Sometimes the things of the world that negatively influence or affect me are stereotypes and preconceived notions about this person or that people group. Turn with me to Acts 10 as we explore how this can happen and how God works to set things right.

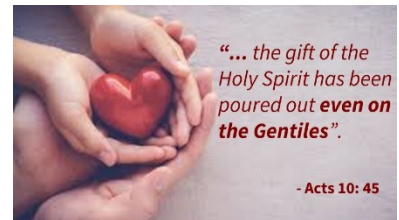
In Acts 10 Peter is sent down an uncomfortable road. Like Philip, when he went to the Ethiopian eunuch in last week's reading, Peter was asked to trust in God's guidance. In this case, Peter and his familiar understandings – his notions and stereotypes – are turned upside down by God. Peter was born and raised a Jew – one of God's chosen people. All others are Gentiles – unclean, half breeds, pagans. At the beginning of Acts 10 Peter has two visions. In the first vision God reveals that all things that God made are clean. This rocks Peter's world as his long held dietary practices are unilaterally jettisoned. Then Peter is told to go with some men who will come to the house that he is staying at. Peter does so and finds himself in the home of a Gentile – and a Roman centurion to boot.

As Peter is sharing the good news of Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and all of those gathered there. Each is baptized into the faith. An astonished Peter declares, *"that the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on the Gentiles"*. Even on the Gentiles. God challenges Peter's understandings, his beliefs, his practices, his stereotypes, his prejudices.



God rocked his boat. Just as all food that God had made was clean, so too are all peoples that God had made. All are good and worthy and beloved and valued. These people that Peter had long rejected are beloved by God, worthy of receiving the Holy Spirit. As I pondered this story, the Spirit brought me a little conviction. Perhaps you have experienced this too. The phrase that stuck with me was those last four words: *"even on the Gentiles"*.

That God could love even these was a revelation to Peter. It would send shock waves through the early church. This understanding would change everything.



But that phrase: *"even on the Gentiles"*. The Spirit was asking me, 'John, who are your Gentiles'? Who are the people that I, like Peter, look down on and think are not worthy of God's love? Who are your Gentiles?... The pondering and these questions made me realize that my love for the other sometimes falls short.

In our John 15 passage, as Jesus raises the standard from student or disciple to friend, he is elevating the form of love that is expected. A student or disciple would practice *phila* or brotherly love. A friend would practice *agape* or unconditional love. To illustrate what this kind of agape love looks and feels like when lived out, please listen to this illustration of unconditional love.



Back in the fifteenth century, in a tiny village near Nuremberg, lived a family with eighteen children. Eighteen! In order merely to keep food on the table for this big family, the father and head of the household, a goldsmith by profession, worked almost eighteen hours a day at his trade and any other paying chore he could find in the neighborhood.

Despite their seemingly hopeless condition, two of Albrecht Durer the Elder's children had a dream. They both wanted to pursue their talent for art, but they knew full well that their father would never be financially able to send either of them to Nuremberg to study at the Academy.

After many long discussions at night in their crowded bed, the two boys finally worked out a pact. They would toss a coin. The loser would go down into the nearby mines and, with his earnings, support his brother while he attended the academy. Then, when that brother who won the toss completed his studies, in four years, he would support the other brother at the academy, either with sales of his artwork or, if necessary, also by laboring in the mines.

They tossed a coin on a Sunday morning after church. Albrecht Durer won the toss and went off to Nuremberg. Albert went down into the dangerous mines and, for the next four years, financed his brother, whose work at the academy was almost an immediate sensation. Albrecht's etchings, his woodcuts, and his oils were far better than those of most of his professors, and by the time he graduated, he was beginning to earn considerable fees for his commissioned works.

When the young artist returned to his village, the Durer family held a festive dinner on their lawn to celebrate Albrecht's triumphant homecoming. After a long and memorable meal, punctuated with music and laughter, Albrecht rose from his honored position at the head of the table to drink a toast to his beloved brother for the years of sacrifice that had enabled Albrecht to fulfil his ambition. His closing words were, "And now, Albert, blessed brother of mine, now it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg to pursue your dream, and I will take care of you."

All heads turned in eager expectation to the far end of the table where Albert sat, tears streaming down his pale face, shaking his lowered head from side to side while he sobbed and repeated, over and over, "No ...no ...no ...no."

Finally, Albert rose and wiped the tears from his cheeks. He glanced down the long table at the faces he loved, and then, holding his hands close to his right cheek, he said softly, "No, brother. I cannot go to Nuremberg. It is too late for me. Look ... look what four years in the mines have done to my hands! The bones in every finger have been smashed at least once, and lately I have been suffering from arthritis so badly in my right hand that I cannot even hold a glass to return your toast, much less make delicate lines on parchment or canvas with a pen or a brush. No, brother ... for me it is too late."

More than 450 years have passed. Hundred's of Albrecht Durer's masterful portraits, pen and silver point sketches, water-colors, charcoals, woodcuts, and copper engravings hang in every great museum in the world, but the odds are great that you, like most people, are familiar with only one of Albrecht Durer's

works. More than merely being familiar with it, you very well may have a reproduction hanging in your home or office.

One day, to pay homage to Albert for all that he had sacrificed, Albrecht Durer painstakingly drew his brother's abused hands with palms together and thin fingers stretched skyward. He called his powerful drawing simply "Hands," but the entire world almost immediately opened their hearts to his great masterpiece and renamed his tribute of love "The Praying Hands." These hands tell the story of unconditional, sacrificial, selfless love.



Before we get comfortable thinking that Jesus is just calling us to love one another – our family or our brothers and sisters in this community of faith – in this unconditional love, we must remember that all people are worthy of God's love. The Gentiles, the pagans, the atheists, all the ones who are different from us. To live as incarnations of Christ in the world, we must be willing to see all of our relationships and all of our interactions with the other through this lens of agape love. As friends of Jesus Christ, we should be willing to practice all of these "true friendship" characteristics with not only those in our social or family circles, but with all that we meet.

To have a true friend, one must be a true friend. The same principle goes for our relationship with Jesus. If I want Jesus to be my true friend, then I need to be willing to be Jesus' true friend. If I want Jesus to do some of those things that we named as things we value in our best friends, then I need to be willing to do those things for Jesus. You see, I want Jesus to pick me up when I am down, to

encourage me when I am doubting or afraid, to support me when I am struggling, to relieve my burdens when life is hard. If that is what I want from Jesus, then I must be willing to lift others when they are down, I must be willing to encourage others when doubt and fear arise, I must be willing to lend a hand or more when the other is struggling to get by, I must be willing to alleviate another's burden when I am able. You see, when we do these things for the least of these, for the others, we do them for Jesus.

If I want Jesus to convict me when I am about to do or say or think something I shouldn't, then I need to be willing to hold others accountable, even if there is a cost. If I want him to forgive me when I don't deserve forgiveness, then I must be willing to forgive others even when it is really hard and when it requires me offering the forgiveness. If I want Jesus to redirect me when I am wayward, then I must be willing to speak hard truths to those in power even if it places me in danger. If I want Jesus to rescue me when I am hard pressed, then I have to be willing to stand for justice and equality for others. In short, everything I want from Jesus I must be willing to do for all others, especially for the least of these.

Using last week's illustration, we should be willing to go down these roads not just to see our good friends, but to sacrificially love anyone that we meet along the road. As we think about those that we might meet as we seek to take the love of Christ out into the world, may we offer authentic and true friendship to all the world, to all people. In each encounter, may we be willing to sacrifice for the other. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider your prejudices and stereotypes, who are your “Gentiles”? How is God calling you to love and minister to even these?
- 2) *Pray*. Which of God’s commands are most challenging you right now? Seek guidance from the Holy Spirit as you seek to abide and obey Christ.
- 3) *Study*. Read Acts 10: 44-48. In what ways are these Gentiles now just like Peter and the other believers? When have you experienced something like this on your journey of faith?