

Called to Be Friends
John 15:9-15
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This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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.

John 15:12-15

Love and friendship are our themes this morning. They go hand in glove. "Love one another the way I have loved you." So simple and yet so hard. To understand where this commandment comes from, we must go back to the Hebrew Scriptures, all the way back to Genesis, where we learn that God created Adam so he could have a friend, and then God created Eve so Adam could have a companion. From the beginning, God seeks to be in relationship with us. God wants us to love God's self with all our heart, mind, and soul and then to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Moses and Abraham were called friends of God because they had a direct relationship with God which sustained them through their years of trials and tribulations. Becoming one of God's friends was the highest calling in Judaism. Diana Butler Bass in her book *Freeing Jesus* says, "...Friendship, the knowing, loving, and free and joyful giving to another is the passionate desire of God."

One of the most articulate speakers for this theology of friendship in Christianity is St. Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century bishop who believed that our friendship with God established a new covenant which is central to our call to being faithful. He said, "The only thing truly worthwhile is becoming God's friend. It is through friendship with God that we are changed more and more into the image of God."

In 2018 while traveling around the country as your missionary doing presentations about my work in Palestine, I visited St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco. It was September 11 and I wanted to take time off to pray. I sought refuge in a sanctuary I had heard about and had seen pictures of. The ceiling of the Basilica was painted with dancing saints---traditional and contemporary. The church is named after St. Gregory and has taken his theology to a whole new level with an emphasis on how we are all made in God's image and thus saints invited to the dance of life. I ended up spending the whole day in this lovely sanctuary with its round table so the people could dance around it. I sang, danced, meditated, and bathed in the beauty of this peaceful and inspiring worship space.

Note in these images how there are traditional saints and artists and musicians. The mission of the church reads, "St. Gregory's church invites people to see God's image in all humankind, to sing and dance to Jesus' lead, to become God's friends." We become God's friends by dancing to Jesus' lead.

In our Gospel reading from John this morning, Jesus commands his disciples to make themselves at home in his love just as he has in his Father's love. The reason for this is so that we may share joy, a fully ripe mature joy. Dear Ones, this is why we are singing Joyful, Joyful We Adore You this morning. Jesus, our divine friend, speaks truthfully to us about all he knows about the Father. In sharing everything, Jesus enables his disciples to participate in the intimacy and trust of the Father and through this they acquire the privilege of friendship. The same is true for us.

This intimacy can best be seen in the foot-washing story in John 13. The verb used to describe Jesus removing his outer garment at John 13:4 is the same verb used to describe Jesus' laying down his life. You could say Jesus laying down his robe anticipates his laying down his life in friendship soon to come. By washing

the feet of his disciples, he makes the ultimate act of hospitality and friendship. He engages in an act that makes his love and grace visible. In case Peter and his disciples don't see the significance, he says, "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me." The followers are asked to receive and participate in this messy watery act of love. In the foot washing Jesus and the disciples move from being servants and master to being friends. It is this same loving friendship which is being called out for us today in John 15.

Dear Ones, 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. It is something we all are called to do.

So, the question is are we ready to be friends with Jesus? Do we really believe we are all made in God's likeness and desired as friends? Do we really believe we have been let in on everything? Would you rather be called a child of God instead of a friend of God? If Jesus is our friend, can he still be our redeemer, our savior? Is this why this commandment is so hard to follow? So many unknown questions and unsettled thoughts?

The Quakers are called The Society of Friends because they believe everyone is filled with the light or the presence of God and therefore, they have no need for clergy or even a church; all are friends of the Truth or Light. This idea was so radical that our ancestors, the Puritans, ran them out of town all the way down to Rhode Island.

So, Dear Ones, our call this morning to be friends of God through following the lead of Jesus is more challenging than you perhaps first had thought for not only does it require for you to fully allow yourself to be lead but to find joy and freedom in doing so, so much so that you would pour out your love for another.

Dear Ones, Friends, let us leave here drenched in the sunshine of Spring and the warmth of God's friendship, ready to dance with the Lord of the Dance.