

“Servants No Longer”
Text: John 15:9-17
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I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing...John 15:15a

Among my most treasured friendships are those that I share with my colleagues on the staff here at Morningside. There is no one among my friends here for whom I have more respect and affection than our organist and choir director. Walter's and my relationship stands in stark contrast to that of a minister and a choir director in the story that I'm about to tell you.

It seems that there was a long-standing feud between the two, which finally came to a head the week the preacher delivered a sermon on commitment, and how the congregation ought to be much more committed to Christian service than they were. After the sermon, the choir director led the choir in singing “We Shall Not Be Moved.” The next Sunday, the preacher preached on giving, and how members of the congregation ought to be more committed to the practice of tithing. That week, the choir director chose as the sermon hymn “Jesus Paid It All.” The next Sunday, the preacher admonished the congregation not to engage in gossip. The hymn that week – “I Love to Tell the Story.” At the evening service that night, the minister had had it. He told the congregation how frustrated he was to the point that he was really considering leaving. The hymn the choir director chose was “Why Not Tonight?” And when the preacher finally did resign the next Sunday, he told the congregation in his sermon that it had been Jesus who had led him there, and now Jesus was leading him away. Of course the choir sang “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Today we turn to the topic of friends. Surely one of the most wonderful moments in John's account of the life of Jesus occurs near the end of Jesus' life, when he tells the disciples that they are his friends. He had called them “servants,” just as he understood himself to be a servant. Together they shared the role of servanthood. They, like he, had been chosen to do the will of God - the will of God, who had sent him. Jesus now parses their roles; they have been servants, but now they are also friends - two different ways of speaking of the divine/human relationship: The word “servant,” evoking the idea of deference and obedience, the word “friend” evoking thoughts of intimacy and camaraderie. I am tempted to say equality, but that would be an error in thinking because Jesus, though he sat with his disciples around the table, though he spoke to them friend to friend, though he loved them and they loved him, remained their Lord, and they remained his disciples. (1)

I like Jürgen Moltmann's idea of friendship, that it may or may not include equality, but it always includes affection and respect. (2) Surely we know this to be the case in our own lives. Think of that teacher whom you admired and whom you looked up to, who made time for you - the older person, friend to the younger, the mentor who taught you so much in the early years of your professional life, the older couple in the church who befriends you and cares about you and your children. The disciples were not Jesus' peers, but they were his friends, and they would remain so even when he departed from them. There was one condition: They were to obey the commandment he had given them, and what an odd thing to command: *You are commanded to love one another*. As the Father's love for Jesus was mirrored in Jesus' love for the disciples, so the disciples would mirror Christ's love in the way they treated one another, in the community of faith, and in the way they embodied his love in the world. (3)

Jesus gave his life as the ultimate expression of divine love, and he commanded those he left behind to continue what God had started in him. Love begets love begets love. He was not speaking about a feeling or an emotion. Emotions can be quite fickle. He was speaking about a way of life that considers the needs of others as much as one considers one's own needs, a way of life that could sometimes cost you your life. His death on the cross and the subsequent deaths of many of his followers at the hands of the Roman Empire bear witness to the costliness of the love of which Jesus spoke. Of all the things you can say about the crucifixion of our Lord, the most important thing to say is this - he died for love. That's it. He died for love. He died for us. It has always broken my heart that one of the best verses in all Scripture has been used in such a mean-spirited way. John 3:16 - *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but might have eternal life*. The whole point is restoration and reconciliation. You can let the rest of it go, but if the faith community that gathers in Jesus' name has not love, then it has nothing - that's the heart of the matter.

Jesus wants his friends to love as God loves. That is not a particularly easy thing to do, but he made it possible. He was the bridge over which the infinite, eternal Creator of all things visible and invisible crossed and entered into human existence. It is a complex theological idea, and yet it is the most basic of all things. In Jesus Christ, human love and divine love became all mixed up together. He was fully human and fully God, and so when Jesus is talking about love, there's no way to parse it and say this part of love is divine, and that part is human. It is all mixed up together. It is that crazy, mixed-up love that will go all the way for the sake of the other. We are actually ourselves capable of expressing that love in our lives. I cannot think of a greater miracle.

But it's not easy. Perhaps that is why we are commanded to love. Left to our own devices, we might put it under the category of "optional", rather than where it belongs, at the top of the list of "essentials". Remember Jesus' answer to the

young lawyer who wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said – *What's in the law?*

The law says to love God with everything you've got and your neighbor as yourself, the lawyer replied. That's the summation of the law and a great reminder that Christianity is not the sole steward of divine love. What Christianity does is to reveal God's love in a unique way - a vulnerable, suffering, willing-to-go-all-the-way kind of love. Jesus goes on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan who went out of his way to help a stranger in trouble.

I love the story my friend Tom Tewell tells about the day Mother Teresa spoke to the National Prayer Breakfast in the mid-90's. (She died in 1997.) The speaker who introduced her said, "I would like you now to hear from the greatest woman in the world."

Mother Teresa at 4'11" came to the podium and said, "If I were the greatest woman in the world, you would think that God would have made me a little taller." Then she went on to say, "I'll tell you who I am; I am not a great woman. I am but a tiny pencil in the hand of God, one through whom God writes love letters to the world."

It is not always easy to love. But that's why we're here. God has only us to spread around the love that comes from the other realm. Why is it so difficult? I think it is probably because of nothing any more complicated than sin. Sin stands in the way, and so we fall short of what we are actually capable of. I read something just recently that has helped me think about all of this. George Pasley writes, "The only real progress in the world will come when real people start loving other real people no matter what the risk." (4)

There are three things that might make the practice of love less intimidating. First, stop trying to make yourself feel a certain way. I'll never forget when the father of a soon-to-be bride came to see me and allowed as how he didn't have much use for his soon-to-be son-in-law. "I don't know what to do, Joanna. I can't make myself like him."

I answered, "No, you can't. No one can make oneself like somebody else, but you can love someone else even if you don't like them. You can treat them with respect and civility." Stop worrying about how you feel.

Secondly, take some baby steps. Just a baby steps. (5) If, if you can't go all the way, if you are not called go all the way, to give your life for the cost for the sake of others, then can you please maybe give an hour, a morning out of your week? The 40 of you who have done that week after week for Habitat these past seven Saturdays are an inspiration to the rest of us.

Maybe you can't love your next-door neighbor whose dogs bark all the time, but you don't have to be mean. Do something to lessen the tension in your own home. Stop being so busy and give the loved ones in your life more of yourself. I have told you before the story of the mother who was explaining to her little girl why her dad was never around. She said, "Your dad, he really has to work hard; he is working late again tonight. I'm sorry honey, but he's behind in his work. . ."

The daughter said, "Maybe they could put Daddy in a slower group."

The third thing to do is to keep practicing. (6) Even if it doesn't come naturally, act loving. Curb your tongue. Every single one of us has the God-given capacity to love with a Christ-like love, every single one of us. And no, none of us is likely to turn into Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa any time soon. But we can get the hang of it, because the impulse to love that God put in us and that Christ renewed in us cannot be completely stamped out. If you kill it, it will come back. We were created and then recreated for and by love.

Jesus said, "I'm not going to call you servants any longer. I am going to call you friends. I will let you in on everything that the Father has shared with me." How wonderful! How open, how generous he was with the unique knowledge he had about infinitely important things. He knows the secret that lies at the heart of everything, and he shares it completely.

And how wide was his embrace! Oh, that latter got him into a lot of trouble. What did they say about him; he was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners"? He showed up at the dinner tables of people that other people had said were unclean. He welcomed women and children. In the society in which he functioned, neither the society nor the synagogue thought that women or children were worth the time of day. You remember when the children tried to come to him, even the disciples tried to get them away from him. What did he say? "Let the little children come to me, because of such is the kingdom of God."

When Jesus called his disciples "friends", he was not setting up a separate, little exclusive fraternity. He was inviting them into the great, wide network of God's expansive love. I find it a bracing spiritual discipline to remember that God cares for the person with whom I getting along least in this world just as much as God cares for me. And let us not make the mistake of thinking of Jesus only as friend. Remember the book by J.B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small?* Don't think of Jesus only as your pal, because the one that we call friend is also the transcendent Christ, whose name is above every name, and of whose kingdom there will be no end.

Let me not put rose-colored glasses on any of this. If somebody asks you today, "What did Joanna preach about?"

You might say, "Love and friendship." Everybody will yawn, but this is the real world, and love is costly in this real world. Jesus' friends were anything but unblemished lambs. His friend Judas turned him over to the authorities for the grand sum of 30 pieces of silver. His friend Peter denied him three times before the cock crowed. If there's anybody in this room who has ever been betrayed by a friend - just guessing - it might be comforting to know that Jesus walked that particular valley before you.

And yet on the night that he was betrayed, knowing all that was going to happen, predicting it in fact, he embraced every one of his friends with special care, welcoming them, if you will, into the community of the holy Trinity. Later, when he offered his life, that sealed it, and God became friend forever with the world. (7)

I finish with a word about the church, and how we have an obligation to offer a counterpoint to the world's idea that really nobody needs anybody anymore for anything. It's every man or woman for him or herself. No, no, no. The Quakers say it beautifully; we are a Society of Friends. I love that, connected to each other through God's initiative, needing one another to keep each other human and humble, and encouraged by one another when life gets tough. I think about Phil and Heather and how they're going to need us to keep the promises that we made this morning in helping them raise little Alexander. I'm convinced that one of the main reasons our children, Elizabeth, now 41, and Sam now 39, are the honorable people that they are is that the people who sat in the pews on the Sunday morning when each of them was baptized, kept the promises they made. As Phil was walking away, he said, "Joanna, this means so much to us." I hope it means a lot to us all.

I hope that Morningside will be a place where you encounter and connect with other people and see one another through the good times and bad times, celebrating weddings and births, helping people endure breast cancer, divorce, career disappointments. It's a gift, isn't it, that we can laugh together and cry together, compare our various ailments, and remember one another in our prayers. Life doesn't get any better than that.

Listen, to be a friend of Jesus is not all that complicated. What you have to do is love one another, just as he told us to. That's it. Thanks be to God.

(1) B.A. Gerrish, *The Pilgrim Road*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p.128.

(2) Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, Fortress Press, 1992, p.225.

(3) Notes from the *NRSV*.

(4) George R. Pasley, "Are We in Trouble or What?" *Lectionary Homiletics*, April/May, 2009, p.58.

(5) *Ibid.*

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) Moltmann.