

Jesus' words to us today from John put me in mind of a question: what is friendship?

My recent sermon references to Facebook notwithstanding, I really do not spend much time on it. I check for messages, try to note birthdays when I can, but for the most part I agree with Betty White that it is a colossal waste of time. Still, it has allowed me to reconnect with a number of old friends. I've found folks whose lives coincided with mine for a time when we were members of same community and whose friendships with me were very valuable. But at the same time, the connections that we have now are very tenuous. They are based upon shared history. Even important shared history is not the same as present-tense friendship.

Facebook has another component that I think those of you who participate in it will recognize: it is free therapy for some folks. Mind you, it is not effective therapy, but it is free. Again, if you aren't on Facebook, this is not a reason to get on it.

Well as it happens my home state of North Carolina had a rather large vote this past week on an amendment to their constitution, which I am not weighing in on in this moment – it is not the point of the sermon. You can ask me later what I think about it if you wish and I'll be honest with you, but for the purposes of this sermon, what is significant about it is that a great number of my friends and family turned to Facebook for free therapy in the aftermath of said vote. Those who were in favor of this particular vote were celebratory and those who were against it collectively licked their wounds, and they were wounded. I personally weighed in a time or two, and as it is my preference not to leave a digital trail of my sometimes irrelevant musings, I have a strict policy that the sun does not go down on Facebook for me. What goes up comes down before bed. That means sometimes I

delete folks posts if they are responding to me, and I did that to a friend of mine from a long time back.

It happened we disagreed. We still disagree, that probably isn't going to change. But he then sent me a personal message, which I very much appreciated, that begged the same question: what is a friend? My friend wrote, "I have ambivalent feelings toward Facebook. On one hand, I get sucked into it often, but then also recognize that offers a rather false sense of connectivity with others, with limited capacity for any actual dialogue."

Isn't it the truth?

The world seems to be getting diced up in to shorter and shorter sound bytes – so much so that the idea of a twenty minute sermon is considered in many circles to be passé. The idea of gathering in community gives way to virtual connectivity. A friend of mine recently asked me when I was going to get *my* hologram – I told him that I was open to it but I wanted my hologram to be taller and thinner. Feel free to stretch me out a bit in the virtual reality.

Our sound bytes are shorter. Our connections to one another are characterized by terse communications, letters representing words: lol. brb. ttyl. My own iPhone bears the signature line, "please excuse typos and short replies."

But it all leaves me wondering what friendship is anymore. If Jesus says we are to be his friends, we need to know what that means.

It is interesting what Aristotle said about friendship. "A friend to all," he said, "is a friend to none." In his *Ethics*, he claims there are three kinds of friendship: friendship based on utility, friendship based on pleasure, and friendship based on goodness of

character, and what we believe about each of these shapes who we are. The first two are superficial, but the latter is essential.

But when Jesus speaks of friendship and calls his disciples friends, he has a different metric; a different marker of friendship. When Jesus speaks of friendship, he speaks of love, a rather more grand definition, but also harder to live with.

Let me share a quote I read this past week:

“The legend of Eusebius has it that John in his old age had no other theme but love.

From the rest of us, the speech of the fourth Gospel can descend to the level of a cliché fairly soon. The Johannine flow, so like a Moebius band without beginning or end, can tire the mind – even as it comes from the pen of its creator. As paraphrased by a lesser expositor, it can be unbearable.”¹

Love as the basis for friendship can indeed be vague. There is a lot of love-language in John! It can be so grand and large as to leave nothing concrete with which to work. The demands of love are great, and so the ability to achieve what love calls for can indeed tire the mind and become unbearable.

It is useful to remember that this falls in lengthy teaching discourse. So often in John, the language becomes metaphorical and even allegorical. You know what I mean: sheep, wolves, hired hands... But in this instance, Jesus does not leave the allegory open that we might interpret it but quickly defines his terms. He is very clear what the love of one friend for another looks like.

“Greater love,” he says, “has no one but to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

¹ Gerard Sloyan. John in *Interpretation*. (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1988) p178

Jesus definition of love for us is mixed news, though. I mightily grateful for the one part, where he loves us even to death, that's the source of joy – that Jesus would indeed lay down his life for us, for all of us and our salvation. That's wonderful news.

But then, having defined his terms, he insists on calling us friends. Oh, I know he's speaking to his disciples, but it applies to us.

You see the disciples are notable for their lack of loveliness at times. They certainly weren't bad people, they certainly weren't any less lovely than we are, but neither were they more so. There's nothing in the Gospel to indicate that they were particularly deserving of love. And yet Jesus loves them.

Jesus is the one who starts the friendship, with no basis in merit, and the emulation of him is the experience of being his friends.

In other words, if we are Jesus' friends, it means we love the way he loved.

I think I like being a servant better, to be perfectly honest.

I was leading a discussion group some time back and we began listing the ways that we had to love like Jesus loved. It was an interesting exercise and perhaps one I should recommend to you: take a few minutes this week, turn off your television, log out of Facebook, switch off your radio, leave your phone in the other room, and just take a blank sheet of paper and write down what, in the absence of laying down your life, loving like Jesus would look like. Then you have to do it.

But we engaged in this exercise in theoretical loving, and the results were remarkable.

The group started listing things and it wasn't long before they sounded a lot like Jesus, saying things like, "pray for your enemies." That was a big one, it wasn't so long after some atrocities in Afghanistan when they said that. They liked it because they needed

something to do in response to terrible things. Or “take supper to a sick friend and stay with them.” That’s much like “give us this day our daily bread.” Again, it was a huge hit. People liked the idea of helping a friend who was having a hard time. And then this one, “sit quietly and listen to a boring person.”

That was when my friend Jane blurted out her timeless poetry, “Look, I just want to get in, I’m not going for sainthood.”

Really, servanthood is easier, can’t I just stick with that? It demands so much less of me. You see it is easy to talk about being Jesus’ servants. And certainly the Bible does just that, we speak of being servants of the servant, the one who came to serve, to make God’s love for us known again. There’s plenty of servant language in the Bible. But yet here is that friendship language, friendship based in love.

Friendship based in love, if we are to be Jesus’ friends, is based in emulation. Our closing hymn today sings its way through the life of Jesus and certainly it is a difficult life to emulate: it is easy enough when it is dancing in the morning, but when the sky turns black it gets a lot harder to dance. And yet the refrain insists that we share God’s love as the experience of joy – that indeed we dance with it!

One of you shared a poem with me this week that I want to share with you, it read in part, “If the locomotive of the Lord runs us down, we should give thanks that the end had magnitude.

We must admit there will be music despite everything.”²

Isn’t that wonderful, music despite everything? You see the experience of joy, if it is not merely giddy happiness is the experience of trust. Only in the trust of God’s love can we experience joy. Only in the trust of God’s love dare we to emulate Christ.

² Jack Gilbert. *A Brief for the Defense* in Refusing Heaven

You know that is a great challenge for us to be friends, that we must emulate Christ.

It's so much more than clicking "like" or "unlike" or "friend" or "unfriend."

Love is both the definition and the call of Christian community. I suppose that is akin to being run down by the locomotive of the Lord.

Basically, to steal a line from Paul, we die to the old and are born anew. Basically it means that something changes within us when Jesus invites us into friendship.

There was a time when we fretted more about our relationships. Perhaps I'm wrong but it seems easier now to simply live and let live. I know I do. Some days it's the best can muster. But the emulation of Christ demands sainthood from me, and from you.

In Of the Imitation of Christ, Thomas a Kempis admonishes us, "Without a friend thou canst not well live; and if Jesus be not above all a friend to thee, thou shalt indeed be sad and desolate." And I am particularly moved by this next part, "Thou actest, therefore, like an idiot, if thou trust or rejoice in any other."³

There was indeed a time when Christians would turn aside from the communion rail if we had any grudge or error outstanding against another. The Apostle Paul admonished us to go from the table, make amends, and then return together.

Friendship with Christ, we read, is the source of great joy – that is what we are going to teach Anna, Brooke, Katharine, and Caroline. We are going to walk alongside them, just as we promised, because Jesus walks alongside us.

Love requires more than good feelings, I have come to believe. Love requires courage.

Not just the courage of someone under fire who defies fear to act without interest to safety, but moral courage.

What is the moral courage required for friendship?

³ Thomas a Kempis. Of the Imitation of Christ (Oxford University Press, London 1943) p75

Tom Long tells it this way,

“I once met a Presbyterian woman in the coal country of Pennsylvania who had made the social misstep of becoming engaged to a Catholic in the early 1930s, a time of hardened Protestant boundaries. Her community turned its back on her. Conversations ended when she approached people. She would never forget, she said, the Sunday when a respected woman in her congregation, in bold defiance of prevailing attitudes, publicly embraced her and wished ‘every blessing of God’ on her and her marriage. It was a small act of courage, but one cherished nearly 60 years later.”⁴

I cannot begin to say for you what will be required in the course of your friendship with Jesus. It may at times be much easier to remain a servant. I don’t know whether you will be asked to lay down your life for your friends, or maybe you’ll just feel like doing it some days. It’s *easy living* in Christendom some days, and not so much others.

Sometimes it’s so easy to be a Christian – I know I’ve shared one of my favorite New Yorker Cartoons with you... where a bespectacled plutocrat and his bejeweled, fur wearing wife are shaking hands with the pastor, and as they step into their limousine, and she remarks, “You know, it can’t be easy for him not to offend us.”

I just want to get in; I’m not going for sainthood.

But then again, perhaps you want more?

Perhaps what you hunger for isn’t servanthood but friendship?

Perhaps the ease of sliding into church on Sunday morning and sliding back out just as easily feels a little formulaic some days – the music and the sermon perhaps move you, but something is missing?

⁴ Thomas G. Long. *Small Acts of Courage in The Christian Century*. May 2, 2012. P47

Jesus needs folks with moral courage. Jesus needs friends who will indeed stand up, stand up, for him though not in the ways the old hymn suggested.

The dance of faith calls for moral courage, the imitation of Christ, the living of baptismal vows... those can be a lot of dance steps to keep straight. Thankfully, we're not the ones leading.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.