

Sermon for January 25, 2015  
**Chosen to be Jesus' Friends<sup>1</sup>**  
John 15:12-17

Friendship. Quite simply this is a sermon about friendship. As we continue our sermon series on the Gospel of John today we get to look at another way in which this gospel is unique among the four gospels. The Gospel of John is the only Gospel in which Jesus refers to his disciples as friends.

John 15:14 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.

The concept of friendship is a familiar concept in scripture, as we've heard in the other passages read for us today. In Proverbs, "a friend loves at all times and kinsfolk are born to share adversity," and "as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another, and in Ecclesiastes, Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil, for if they fall, one will lift up the other, but woe to the one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Beyond these texts, there are stories of friendship in the Bible. Recall David and Jonathan in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel and in the Gospel of John, itself Mary and Martha and Lazarus are already named as Jesus' friends.

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Even so, why does it matter that Jesus called his disciples friends?  
Throughout the sermon I hope to give several answers to that question,  
but first let's think about friendship in general.

One of North America's iconic movies about friendship was released in  
1986 and re-issued on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011.

Stand by me

If you're not familiar with the movie, you may be familiar with the song.

When the night has come  
And the land is dark  
And the moon is the only light we'll see  
No I won't be afraid  
Oh, I won't be afraid  
Just as long as you stand, stand by me

So darling, darling  
Stand by me, oh stand by me  
Oh stand, stand by me  
Stand by me

Stand by me, the movie, based on a Stephen King novel is a story of four  
12 year old boys who decide to hike along a railroad track in order to  
find the body of another boy who was hit and killed by a train. It's not  
the kind of plot of a movie that I would normally enjoy, and I was never  
a great fan of the movie until I began to research what it was about it  
that captivated so many people. It begins and ends with writer, Gordie  
Lachance who after reading a newspaper article about the death of his

old friend Chris, recalls the labour day weekend when he and Chris and Teddy and Vern had their great adventure.

Each of the four boys in the movie has already by the age of 12 had some pretty hard knocks. Gordie, who loved to write and tell stories (and eventually becomes the author who retells the story) has been rejected by his father after the death of his foot-ball star older brother and he feels invisible in a household where his parents' grief still consumes them. Chris Chambers has been accused of stealing and lives with the stereotype that he will turn out like the rest of his criminal and alcoholic family even though he is trying hard not to conform to these preconceptions. Teddy Duchamp bears the scars, literally bears the scars, inflicted by his mentally unstable father who held his ear to a stove, and Vern Tessio is overweight, timid and often the target of bullying. They believe that finding the body will make them heroes. The journey they take together reveals the stuff of friendship; the crazy stuff that happens along the way, their vulnerability with each other and the acceptance and safety they find with each other. While there are many quotable quotes from this movie the last line of the story, typed out by the adult author Gordie, best summarizes the nostalgia that this movie often generates in its viewers.

The writer:*[typing on computer]* I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?

Granted that in this context the name of Jesus is likely being taken in vane because I don't presume it was a conscious prayer, still it remains a poignant question and especially because it seemed to have resonated

with millions of viewers. The story of the boys is set in 1959. The movie was released in 1986 and 2011. I think the question remains poignant in every era that this movie touches. The question about friendship seems especially important in societies that value independence, materialism, competitive economics, and the nuclear family as the building block of society. Friendships, especially strong bonds of friendship are often casualties along the way when societies are arranged like ours. Let's add increased mobility and lack of commitment, and the difficulty in forming communal bonds to the list of things that describe our society and it's no wonder movies like this ignite within us an ache for deeper and more enriching relationships or for a time when we might have had them.

So what if we reframe this quote into the prayer it might be on the lips of followers of Jesus. I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?

In the Gospel of John we are being offered an alternative to this nostalgia and the angst of such loneliness.

**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.

A brief aside: I spent the first few weeks of this series in the Gospel of John contemplating, thinking about and studying the Christology of John. Christology is the doctrine of Christ, when you ask questions like, who is

Jesus as portrayed here? Who is Christ, the anointed one, the one sent by the Father, the one who says:

I am the light,

I am the bread

I am the gate for the sheep

I am the good shepherd

I am the way and the truth and the life.

And there is at least one verse where Jesus simply says

I Am – in other words claiming to be in such union with God so as to be able to claim with God to be the great I Am.

So much of the gospel portrays mounting tension in response to Jesus' often repeated almost exasperatingly repeated but always clear understanding of his own identity.

I was so busy paying attention to all of that, that I almost missed the key point in this passage where Jesus makes an important identity claim about the disciples.

In these chapters, starting as early as chapter 13 when he washes their feet and through chapter 17 where he prays to the Father on their behalf, Jesus focuses his attention almost exclusively on the disciples.

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

I do not call you servants[a] any longer, because the servant[b] 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.

Yes, the identification of the disciples as friends has an “if” clause. You have to love each other as I have loved you in order to be a friend of Jesus. Maybe that’s why so many people feel nostalgic for the friends we had when we were 12. The older we get the harder it is to love so freely, isn’t it? And yet there’s more here than just loving each other. For those to whom Jesus reveals the divine parent and everything the divine parent says, Jesus both chooses and appoints them to bear fruit.

Who are the people to whom Jesus has revealed these things? Who are the people who did not choose and were chosen? In last week’s sermon, Jeff did a really good job of pointing to the layers of interpretation in the text that help us to answer that question.

First there were the original audiences of this gospel, the often-persecuted mixed ethnic people of the late first century who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, many of whom were Jews who were consequently kicked out of their beloved synagogues, and second, are the people who will come to believe through their witness that Jesus is who he claims to be. We are that second group of people – this church, this community, us. This passage says that neither they or we do the choosing, but Jesus chooses and appoints us to be friends. By this statement I do not subscribe to a pre-destination theology where some are chosen and some are not and you have to figure you who you are. Jesus chooses and appoints everyone who responds to his offer of light and life and love with recognition that he is the One who reveals God to

us.

God loves the world so much that Jesus who reveals that love to us is willing to lay down his life for his friends – there is no greater love than this.

We are those friends. That is our identity. It describes who we are.

We can claim that identity for ourselves. Does anyone have friends later on like the ones we had when we were children? This is precisely what we are being offered. According to this passage friendship describes the quality of the relationship we can have with Jesus.

It means we are not servants, and

It means that through Jesus we will have access to the Father, or if you will to God our divine parent, because Jesus makes known to his friends everything that he hears from God.

And if we use the other passages for today to flesh out the qualities of that friendship

it means that we have someone with whom to share adversity.

If iron sharpens iron and one person sharpens the wits of another, it means that Jesus is also someone with whom we will occasionally clash.

Sparks might fly as we wrestle our way toward truth. Let me add parenthetically that this appears to be a mode of friendship more amendable to some than others.

And just as water reflects the face so one human heart reflects another.

What does it mean to have ones own heart reflected in the face of Jesus?

These are things that the friendship of Jesus offers us.

And yes, as I've already said, there is a catch.

As our own hearts begin to reflect the face of Jesus, we will learn to love like he loves, in fact it is essential that we learn to love like he loves for this is his commandment.

He chooses us and appoints us as friends so that like the imagery of the vine and the branches that opens John chapter 15, we can grow and be nurtured and strengthened and pruned in order to bear fruit, fruit that will last. Will this also mean that we need to lay down our lives for our friends? For some it may. Clearly, this friendship is not without pretty stringent requirements. Are any true friendships without requirement? Is this not why friendships are so hard to sustain in this age? We don't want requirements, restrictions, clauses, commandments, not even if this is the truth that will set us free.

To conclude,

Why does it matter that Jesus called his disciples friends?

First, friendship bestows on the original disciples and those of us who follow in their footsteps a surprising identity – one that provides us with a place of safety and acceptance where we can be vulnerable, one where our adversity is shared, our face is reflected and sparks can fly if necessary, because all of these things will strengthen, nurture and sustain us and will enable us to grow into the kind of love we are commanded.

Second, our identification as friends gives us some idea of what our relationship with Jesus requires of us.



Friendship with Jesus requires that we follow his commandment to love one another as he has loved us and as *we abide in the vine that he is it means that we will bear the marks of pruning so that we will one day be able to bear the fruit of that love.*

Ultimately this identity means that we won't need to look back with nostalgia on one moment of our lives when we experienced friendship, but rather can look forward with hope to the new depths and richness of what the fruit of this friendship will mean for us and for a world that aches for true friends.