Sermon: Friendship

November 15, 2026

John 15:9-17

After high school, I took a gap year and headed to Belfast, Northern Ireland for a few months. I fell in love with the landscape, the busy social life, and above all, the humour. It did take me a while to understand that the constant Irish ribbing and teasing was a sign of affection, not hostility. As Oscar Wilde, a famous Irishman once said, "a true friend stabs you in the front, not the back."

While in Ireland, I received letters from my oldest friend Matt. Literally my oldest friend – he was a month old when he and his mom visited me and my mom in the hospital on the day of my birth. By the hand of the Holy Spirit, Matt was paired with Mike Schmidt as a roommate at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo and Matt wrote to me about this Kansas farmer that I didn't yet know who would eventually become my husband.

I have never had so many outright disagreements with anyone like I've had with Matt in our 51 years of friendship. I am not inclined to fighting, but Matt brings it out in me. And, at the end of the day, I know that we will still be friends no matter what. Our friendship is defined by trust and honesty, by shared experiences, shared Mennonite heritage, shared moments of grief at the loss of loved ones, shared memories of watching each other grow up through our awkward puberty years, participation in one another's weddings, and a loyalty that sees us through our differences.

As you might have guessed, this sermon is about friendship. I liked it when Peter asked you a question in his last sermon, so I will do the same today. What are some important qualities in a friend?

Over the last few weeks, I have asked many people what friendship means to them, including some of you, and have gotten a number of different responses. Some people spoke about shared interests and values, being able to be authentic, having mutual opportunities for learning and growth, experiencing unconditional love, having someone you can call when times are hard, being able to pick up where you left off as if no time has passed, showing grace and forgiveness, knowing you are safe. A few people mentioned that there can be seasons of friendship, ebbs and flows, that sometimes one person needs more than the other, and that some friendships grow apart and that's okay.

In our scripture passage, we hear Jesus talk about the disciples as his friends in a very intimate way. And that they are to abide in his love the way he abides in his Father's love. The word "abide," or "meno" in Greek, means to remain or to find a dwelling place. Jesus is telling the disciples that they can find their true home in his love and in their love for one another by obeying and glorifying God. Abiding love is an action, it bears fruit and does something in the world. It is not just a feeling, although Jesus says it brings "complete joy."

In John 15:15, Jesus says to the disciples: 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. And, yet, Jesus also *commands* these friends to be *obedient* to God's will. Isn't obedience the action of a servant not a friend?

I think the key here is that a servant might receive a command without any explanation. It's a "because I said so" following of orders without knowing the purpose behind the command. In this passage, we hear that Jesus has revealed God's truth to the disciples, so they have an understanding of why God wants them to abide in love. And that love isn't a one-way thing. It is a mutual in-dwelling revealed through mutual service. We see this mutuality earlier in the gospel of John when God, through, Jesus, shows the disciples an intimate act of care and service when he washes their feet.

At first, Peter is shocked and refuses Jesus' seeming humiliation. It should be him washing Jesus' feet, not the other way around! But Jesus responds by saying: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me" (13:8). Biblical scholar Gail R. O'Day suggests this paraphrase: "Unless I wash you, you are not my friend." She argues that friendship is "the theological center of the Gospel of John."[1]

I've often thought of Jesus as a bit of a loner who seems to retreat into solitude. I think of the prophetic voice of Isaiah talking about the lonely suffering servant who is later associated with Jesus saying: "he was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom others hide their faces. He was despised and we held him of no account" (53:3).

How could anyone possibly understand what it would have been like to be him? What it would have been like to carry the knowledge of his impending crucifixion? What it would have been like to be the Son of God? The Messiah.

[1] As quoted in Willard M. Swartley's Commentary on John

And yet, here, Jesus is surrounded by those he calls friends! Jesus takes these friends into his confidence so that they might know what he knows about God. And, like him, they might even be willing to lay down their lives for their friends. For there is no greater love than this.

We have a different conception of friendship today than they would have had in the ancient world. For example, in ancient Greece, friendship was "homophilic" ("homos" meaning "same" and "philia" meaning "love"). To be considered friends, you had to be similar to each other and equals. Men and women weren't friends. Masters and slaves weren't friends. Friendships were had with those of the same class and public standing. They were not erotic and were viewed as being more noble than romance because romance was seen as potentially fleeting as opposed to the lasting nature of true friendship.

Furthermore, friendship was seen as a moral force. Having a really good friend could make you a more ethical person. Philosophers Plato and Aristotle both thought that we should establish friendships with those who are alike to us in virtue and character.[2] But not all friendships were the same.

Aristotle categorizes 3 different types of friendship:

1. A friendship of utility – What we can do for each other. Putting in a good word for someone, doing someone a favour, buying someone a gift when they have also given you a gift at some point.
2. A friendship of pleasure – How we can enjoy one another's company. Going out on the town, playing a game of pickle ball or squash.
3. A friendship of virtue – Connection through a common sense of the good. Making each other better people through our shared values and holding one another up to high standards.

With each of these types of friendship, we have things in common that connect us.

Jumping ahead to the 19th century, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche challenged Aristotle's view of friendship, but also agreed with him on certain points. It might seem strange to look to Nietzsche for wisdom on friendship given that he did not like to be around a lot of people and that he was known for his grumpiness which might have been due to his chronic health problems, to be fair.

[2] Ruth Abbey interview: https://petermcgraw.org/nietzsche-on-friends

Nietzsche agreed with Plato and Aristotle that friendship is a moral force and can help us to grow into our best selves. A good friend will pull you up, not keep you down for their own purposes. But Nietzsche thought that it is often our differences that make us better, not our similarities. He believed that good friends challenge us and make us consider other perspectives and what we might have overlooked. I think of my friend Matt that I talked about earlier and the ways in which we differ and challenge each other.

Nietzsche moves from the idea of "homophily" or loving sameness to "heterophily" or loving diversity. This kind of heterophilic love takes a lot more work – work on one's own ego needs, one's reactivity and defensiveness, and it expands narrow-mindedness, sometimes painfully so. It means stepping outside of our echo chambers and really listening to other points of view and experiences. It means not keeping friendship at the level of flattery and constant agreement, but respecting one another's differences when they are voiced. Having friendships with an element of heterophily means that we will inevitably have more conflict. But we will also have an opportunity to *make* peace, not just keep the peace. When we make peace, we need courage, humility, honesty, and grace. We need strategies so that we are prepared to make peace. When we simply keep the peace, we avoid possibilities for deeper connection and healing. Possibilities for abiding love.

Despite Nietzsche's famous criticism of the Christian religion, I see a lot of heterophily in how Jesus chose his friends who had a wide range of backgrounds and occupations. They weren't all from the same class or life experience. And they weren't all men. We know that Jesus hung out with those considered "unclean" by society – sex workers, sinners, the sick. And his disciples weren't all the same types of people. Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen, Matthew was a tax collector who would have been somewhat of a social outcast in Jewish society and probably had more money than some of the disciples. Simon was a Zealot who presumably would have been politically opposed to Matthew, and so on.

I wonder how they all got along? What were their personalities like? Did they irritate each other? Did they enter into long debates amidst their confusion when trying to understand Jesus' cryptic parables? Did some of them talk too much? Take more than their share of food? Leave their dirty clothes lying around? Tell corny jokes?

We know that God's love is not a zero-sum game with winners and losers. God has more than enough love for all. But did Jesus *like* some of the disciples more than the others? If so, did this cause jealousy?

One of his unnamed friends is talked about as the "disciple whom Jesus loved." This is a depiction of John 13:23-25 when this disciple, who is reclining, leans against Jesus' chest during their last meal together (image on slide).

This beloved disciple is mentioned 6 times in the book of John and there are many theories about who this might be. Scholars have thought that this was John himself, or Lazarus, or James. There is a book in the Apocrypha called the *Gospel of Mary* that did not make it into the biblical canon. In this account, Mary (probably Mary Magdalene) is referred to as being loved by Jesus more than the others. In any case, it could have been any number of Jesus' many friends.

What we get is a picture of Jesus surrounded by a close community of friends, not a man of constant sorrow. So, what does it mean for us to be friends with Jesus? Friends with God? Jesus says that if God abides in us and we abide in God, we will come to know God's truth and God's plans for us. And we will know that we are not alone, but held close, like the disciple whom Jesus loved.

I'll end with these words from a favourite hymn, "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (number 536 in Voices Together, verse 2):

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give the living water, thirsty one; stoop down and drink and live." I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream. My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him." Amen.