

John 15:9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Family and Friends

May 6, 2018

One of the things you notice right away about our mountain communities is that many of us have family that grow up and stay in the area. Your family is often right next door or just down the way. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. You may have to decide that for yourselves. The plus side is that when your car breaks down you have someone to call. When your children are sick you know grams and gramps will step in. When you don't have anything for dinner sometimes you can just show up at moms and enjoy a meal, as long as you help with the dishes.

However, there are many people who live miles or even continents away from their immediate family. sometimes this is by choice but often it is due to job opportunities, marriage, school, military service, or calling. My older sister who lives in Texas called my mother the other day because her husband had had a mini-stroke. And while Debbie is a strong and capable person she felt all alone because her family is miles away. She had no one to help her. She needed a friend. And sometimes it is our friends that fill in those gaps when family are distant, don't they? As one of those who has moved many miles from my family, I have discovered that family is sometimes where you find them. That is, your friends from work, or school, or church. And those folks often become like family to you sharing meals, childcare, school and church activities, and the journey of faith.

I guess the truth is, we don't really get to choose the family we are born into. And maybe that's true about friends as well. With my good friends, I don't remember if they chose me or I chose them. Something just clicked between us and suddenly we were sharing our life stories and finding common purpose. And the thing about a good friend is that they are someone who will speak the truth to you about things. My good friends are those that not only listen to me but also challenge me to consider the truth of my own story and my own motives and biases. And sometimes I have those friends who really won't let you get by with stupid stuff. You might have a friend like that too.

It makes me wonder about Jesus and his friends. He and the disciples were often on the road, grabbing a meal here and there, working and healing, praying and spreading the good news. stories about their families only show up once in a while in the narrative. We know they had families and maybe they were tagging along or maybe they were holding down the fort at home. We just don't know. But it seems that Jesus and the disciples became a family to each other and I love this moment in the Gospel, the one and only place where Jesus calls them friends. You are no longer servants but friends. And he shares with them all that God has taught him and he challenges them to love one another and everyone else for that matter. Makes me wonder if being friends with Jesus is really what you want, because it will be an odd friendship that's for sure. He will speak some hard

truths and he will expect a relationship where unconditional love and acceptance may prove to be hazardous to your health. It certainly was for him, wasn't it?

I have a good friend who reminds me of Jesus. Whenever we are out having a meal or a glass of wine, she will always spot that one person who is sitting alone or looking lost and start a conversation with them. She will talk to a complete stranger. Even her husband has told me that she would invite someone alone in a restaurant to come and share a meal with them. I am always astounded by this. I want to say, "Don't you have any boundaries at all?" Didn't we come here so we could spend some time together?" But I don't say those things because she's right. And those people really need to be noticed, listened to, and loved. It makes for an odd friendship, but I sure am learning things about hospitality, generosity, and openness. Anything can happen when I'm with her, and it challenges me to be a better friend, to hold up my end of the friendship, and I'll bet that's what the disciples were thinking too. How can we hold up our end of the friendship? Well, Jesus says, "By loving one another and loving all that God loves." Holy Cow, that is a lot of responsibility, isn't it? But the thing about Jesus is, he will not let us do it alone. He will be with us and within us, already moving ahead of us, preparing a way and encouraging us to be his loving presence in the world.

And the first thing that came to my mind when I read all these passages this morning was the song from Toy Story sung by Randy Newman called, "You Got A Friend in Me." I hadn't really listened to the lyrics, but I think they sound a lot like something Jesus would say. It goes like this:

*You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
When the road looks, rough ahead
And you're miles and miles
From your nice warm bed
Just remember what your old pal said
Boy, you've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me*

*You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
You've got troubles, well I've got 'em too
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you
We stick together and we see it through
You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me*

*Some other folks might be
A little bit smarter than I am
Bigger and stronger too
Maybe
But none of them will ever love you the way I do
It's me and you, boy*

*And as the years go by
Our friendship will never die
You're gonna see
It's our destiny*

*You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me*

Do you ever think how odd it is that Jesus chooses you to be his friend? I am still trying to wrap my mind and heart around that one. I just don't always feel that I am worthy enough for Jesus to look over all his prospects and settle on little ole me or you. But he does, and he did. And I hope I can live up to my end of the friendship. I know it will be a life-long challenge.

I want to leave you with a story that really encapsulates the imagery I feel about Jesus being my friend. It is a story that I saw a few years ago on the news about another odd friendship and it just bowled me over when I saw it again this week.

There is an elephant sanctuary in Tennessee where rescued elephants come to live out their lives. The funny thing about the elephants is that when they arrive they almost immediately latch on to another elephant as a friend and family member. They bond quickly and then spend most their time together. Well, there was one elephant, who for some unknown reason didn't bond with any of the other elephants. Her name is Terra and the one she chose as her friend and companion was Bella, a medium sized yellow lab mix dog. They were inseparable. they ate together, slept together, even played together if you can imagine it! But one day Bella injured her back and was unable to walk. They kept her isolated in the main office for three weeks while she recovered. And during those three weeks, every day Terra the elephant, stood vigil outside the gate of the office, rain or shine. Her care givers carried Bella down each day, so they could visit for a short while. And they would both get excited when they saw each other. Bella would wag her tail and Terra would trumpet her feelings and reach out with her trunk to touch her. Eventually, Bella recovered, and they were together once again enjoying one another's company. Bella would even lay on her back and Terra would rub her belly with her foot. Can you picture it? A 5 to 8-thousand-pound elephant rubbing a 60-pound yellow lab on the belly. Their friendship as one reporter put it, "harbors no fears, no prejudices, no secrets, just two living creatures who somehow managed to look past their immense differences. If they can do it, what's our excuse?"

Quite honestly this is an unexpected friendship in the world, isn't it? And when I heard it, all I could think of was, "Isn't this just like my friendship with Jesus?" He is big Y'all! He is unlike any friend I've ever known!

He isn't tame, and he is sometimes dangerous and risky to be around. He will challenge your perceptions about relationships and he will make you think twice about the nature of Love. But he is gentle, he is wise, he is different, he is faithful, he is bigger than life, and he chose me, and he chose you!

And when we are weak he is strong, when we wander he comes and seeks us out, he comes and stands at the door and waits patiently until we turn and come back to him, he welcomes us with a loud bugle of love, and he calls us his friend! And, all he asks in return is that we love one another! Love all those who don't fit the mold and all those who are lost and lonely. All those who are seeking and all those who are afraid, and like my good friend, invite them to the table, a table where all are fed, and all are welcome, to come indeed, to this table of grace all the while saying...

*You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
You've got troubles, well I've got 'em too
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you
We stick together, and we see it through
You've got a friend in me. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.*