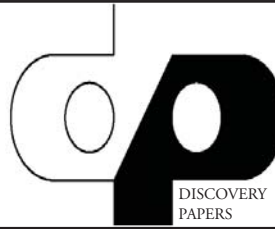




FRIEND OF GOD



Catalog No. 20140323
John 15:1-17
30th Message
Paul Taylor
March 23, 2014

When I was eleven years old, I went from attending a small elementary school to the larger middle school that had several elementary schools feeding into it. I was very concerned about making friends. When I was fifteen years old, I moved from a coastal town in Connecticut to the large city of Houston, Texas. I was very concerned about making friends. When I was nineteen years old, I moved to Palo Alto, California, to start college. I was very concerned about making friends. When I was twenty-three years old, my wife I moved to Sunnyvale after getting married in Texas. We were very concerned about making friends. When I was twenty-six years old, we moved to Dallas, Texas, with a six-week-old baby so that I could attend seminary. We were very concerned about making friends. All throughout my life I have been concerned about making and keeping friends. It's still true today.

Friendship is incredibly important. Across culture, across generations, across life stages—friendship is important. Everyone wants to be connected to people. Everyone wants friends. Friendship is one of the most universally sought after things in life. A good friend is one of the most rewarding gifts that you can enjoy.

Yet, friendship causes a lot of anxiety as well. We worry about making friends. We worry about keeping friends. We wish we had more or better friends. How many of us wish we had more time with our friends? How many of us have friends that live too far away to maintain a close a relationship? How many of us have seen conflict and misunderstanding damage what was once a strong friendship?

C. S. Lewis said, “friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art. . . . It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival.”

We're going to hear a wide variety of people quoted on the importance of friendship this morning. It is universal. But I have also found it to be elusive and frustrating.

We're in the middle of a nine-month-long series right now on the gospel of John. We're calling it *Signs of Life* because we have observed that the author of this gospel repeatedly points to Jesus as the source of life. He uses signs to demonstrate that identity over and over again.

Right now we're looking at the Upper Room discourse in John. It's found in chapters 13–17 and we're using this rich section of the gospel as a text to guide us during the season of Lent. This morning we're looking at John 15:1–17.

This text is one of my favorites in the whole gospel. It is so full of rich imagery. We've been loosely using these icons in the Signs of Life graphic to guide us through the gospel. Each of these corresponds to some image that represents the life that Jesus offers. We've seen the word, light, tears, and others. For a few weeks we've been in the section that we've grouped as the image of the vine. This morning we see that image fleshed out.

Jesus uses the image of the vine as a metaphor to explain the kind of relationship that he will have with his followers after he is gone. At the end of the passage he makes that relationship explicit. It's actually an astonishing claim.

John 15:15—

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

Last week we saw how Jesus was aware of the anxiety of his disciples because of his upcoming departure. We saw Jesus comforting them by assuring them that they would not be alone. Now we see Jesus going a step further and saying something incredible about their relationship. Jesus calls them friends.

Remember that this is a very class-based hierarchical culture. Remember that Jesus is their master, their teacher, their rabbi. Earlier in Jesus' ministry, he had been criticized for acting like a friend to the wrong kind of people. Matthew 11:19 records the Pharisees accusing Jesus of being a “*friend of tax collectors and sinners.*”

Now Jesus is reframing the relationship he has with his disciples. James writes in his letter that the Old Testament father figure Abraham was known as a “friend of God.” Now Jesus says this is offered to all his followers.

When you meet a new person and you consider becoming friends with them, there are at least three questions that might come up: You want to figure out who this person is. What kind of a person are they? What are they interested in? Then you start to find out how you relate with each other. Do you get along? Do they laugh at your jokes? Do they understand your experiences? Finally, you might ask what the result of a friendship with them might be. Where will being their friend bring you? What will be the result of this friendship? The first question has to do with identity. The second question has to do with interaction. The third question has to do with result.

In our passage this morning, Jesus uses the imagery of the vine to describe what friendship with him looks like. He addresses each of these three questions. He talks about what it's like to be his friend. And he describes what happens because of this kind of a friendship.

Once again, these ideas are scattered throughout the passage this morning, so we're going to be pulling out verses to think about each of these ideas. We'll also be thinking about how friendship works in our lives and hearing a bunch of quotes from a wide variety of people on friendship.

In the midst of this, Jesus gives an invitation. It sounds very spiritual and religious, but it's the kind of invitation we hear all the time. It's a risky invitation. It's not complicated, but it can get really difficult. It's an invitation to friendship. This is the question that we will be left with this morning. We all want friends. It's one of the most important parts of our lives. Jesus is offering to call us friends. Will we accept his invitation?

I Am the Vine

Jesus starts out by talking about his identity. He comes back to it in a few places in this passage.

John 15:1—

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

Again in verse 5, he says:

I am the vine; you are the branches.

It's a simple image. Jesus as the vine. His followers are the branches connected to the vine. But what is he trying to communicate through this image?

I'm convinced that there are two parts to why Jesus uses this image. A theological message. And a viticultural one. Viticulture: that's the science of growing grapes. But it's too big of a word for us to use. Let's just say that Jesus talks about the vine because of God and because of grapes.

God seems to be very fond of the idea of the vine. It appears all throughout the Old Testament. Mostly in reference to Israel—God's chosen people.

Psalm 80:8 says, "*You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.*"

Ezekiel 19:10 reads, "*Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard planted by the water, fruitful and full of branches by reason of abundant water.*"

Israel is the vine that was lovingly planted by God the Father. She was meant to take deep root in the land that God had given her. She was meant to thrive and grow luxuriant. She was meant to bear fruit. But that isn't exactly what happened.

Jeremiah 2:21 pictures Israel as a vine that has lost its way, "*Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?*"

So the theological background of the vine imagery is the nation of Israel. Planted by God, intended to be fruitful, but failing in its calling. This is probably why Jesus refers to himself as the "*true vine.*" He has come to get God's people back on track: to do what they failed to do and start a new movement to carry on that original mission.

But not everyone would have been familiar with this background of the vine. The vine has to do with God, but it also has to grapes.

Grapes grow on vines. Grapes were an incredibly important part of life in the ancient near East. They were eaten as a fruit. They were dried to make raisins. But most importantly: they were crushed; the juice was fermented; and that made wine. Psalm 104:15 says that wine "*gladdens the heart of men.*"

Wine was the primary alcoholic beverage of the ancient Israelites. The Egyptians probably introduced them to beer, but they mostly drank wine. The wine they drank had a much lower alcoholic content than wine today. It was often safer to drink than water. And it was widely available. Some estimate that the average Israelite could have consumed as much as one liter of wine every day.

So you can't talk about a vine without thinking about

grapes. And you can't think about grapes without thinking about wine. That makes you think about food, the good life, happiness, joy, and things that grow. If you wanted to pick a single image to represent all the vitality and growth and energy of life, in the ancient near East, you would pick the vine. The vine is life.

Think about someone that you are friends with. Someone that you just really enjoy being around. Why do you like them? What is it that attracts you to them? I've wondered this about some of my friends. I don't really have an answer. There's no objective reason that I'm drawn to this person. I just like them. I want to be around them.

That's the experience of life. It's almost magical or mystical, and it can't be put into words. There are some people we are drawn to. One of our modern poets put it this way, "All you need to do to be my friend is to like me." It might be a bit generous to call Taylor Swift a modern poet, but her words ring true with lots of people.

I think this is what Jesus is claiming for himself. He has that indescribable quality of life. Earlier in this gospel, I suggested that Jesus was the "life of the party." We saw that way back in the beginning of the gospel of John when he came to the wedding feast in Cana and he brought them wine. Gallons and gallons of wine made from water. And not just any wine, but good wine. When we looked at that passage, I suggested that it implied that Jesus came not to bring us religion, but to bring us life. Jesus didn't come to bring religion. He came to bring life.

One of the great tragedies of our culture and the great victories of the enemy is that Jesus is perceived completely opposite to that. Some people have a vague sense that they like Jesus—that it's the church and those pesky Christians that are the problem. But whatever the root, few people associate following Jesus with the experience of life.

Maybe we are partly to blame. Do we think that way? Is that how you think about your faith? When you think about Jesus, what is the primary image that comes to mind? When you think about following him, what does it evoke in you? Is it duty? Bible study? Discipline? Ritual? Suffering?

Those things are all part of following Jesus, but they aren't the only parts. Jesus said earlier in John 10:10, "*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*" Jesus came to bring life. He came so that we can experience life the way it was meant to be. So that we can have deep fulfilling relationships. So that we can contribute to the world in meaningful ways. So that we can experience real love from those around us. So that we can have joy that

isn't dependent on circumstances. So that we can live a life free from guilt and shame and condemnation.

So if Jesus is going to be our friend, the first thing he starts with is by telling us who he is. He likens himself to a vine, the very source of life itself. That's who Jesus is.

Abide In Me

Very quickly, Jesus goes on to describe what being friends with him is like. It's described as a close connection. Like branches growing from the vine. His description of friendship is centered on an invitation.

John 15:4—

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

And also verses 9-10:

As the Father has loved me, so have I 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.

First Jesus gives them this interesting invitation: to abide in him as he abides in them. Then he changes it slightly to "abide in my love." The idea is the same. It's one of the most powerful and mysterious ideas in the New Testament. Over and over again, following Christ is described with this kind of deep intimate language.

What do you want from a friend?

Seneca, the Roman philosopher says this, "One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood."

Henri Nouwen says, "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing . . . not healing, not curing . . . that is a friend who cares."

What is it that all these people are trying to get at? What is the essence of friendship that we all crave so desperately?

I had a friend in college who I spent a lot of time with. We lived together for several years. We were in the same major. We played volleyball together. We knew each other

so well. We could be sitting in a class together and if the professor said something that we thought was funny, we could just glance at each other and know for sure what the other was thinking. I don't see this friend too often anymore, but I still find myself thinking that I know how he might respond to different situations.

What is that quality of friendship? I don't think we can describe it in words. But we are familiar with it. That's why Jesus uses an image. First the image of branches and a vine and the idea of abiding in each other. It has something to do with connection, something about intimacy—as if you are inside of each other's heads, as if you are connected at the root.

Jesus says that friendship with him is intimate, connected. You will be known. You will know Jesus.

Do we know Jesus like that? This is one of the reasons that we're studying the gospel of John this entire year. We did an overview of the whole biblical story before this and then we wanted to focus on Jesus and really get to know him.

And that's where his invitation comes into play. Jesus is telling us what we need to do in order to have this kind of connection. It's the only command in this passage. "*Abide in me.*" Later, it's "*abide in my love.*"

Oprah Winfrey says this, "Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."

This is one of the clearest signs of a true friend. A true friend stays with you.

After I moved to Texas when I was fifteen, I worked hard to find friends. I started playing on the volleyball team in the fall and so those were the first real friends that I made. I started hanging out with a small group of people pretty regularly.

But then the season ended and I started meeting new people. I was asked to a dance by a girl. She was part of a slightly more popular crowd. And I fell into a new group of friends that ended up being my primary community for the rest of high school. But I was always aware—and I still am to this day—that I left some friends behind. They had been good friends. But I didn't stay with them. And they knew it. I'm sure their feelings were hurt for it. Jesus is asking us to stay.

This is exactly what Peter couldn't do. Not too long after

Jesus said these words, Peter claimed not even to know Jesus. Is there any worse way to betray a friend? Peter says, "That guy? Oh, I don't know him. I wouldn't be caught dead with him." Except that only an hour ago, that's exactly what he said he would do.

Staying is hard. We get bored of people. We find new opportunities. Jesus is offering to be our friend and he is giving a simple invitation: stay. *Stay with Jesus.*

The reason he has to say this is that we all have a bit of a battle within us. We want intimacy. We want to be known. We want this kind of friendship that Jesus is describing. But it is also terrifying. We are scared. Because every one of us in this room has been hurt by someone else. We have all opened up to someone who has ended up hurting us. We are afraid of intimacy. And we have good reason to be.

But not with Jesus. Friendship with him is different. What he says in this verse is that he isn't going anywhere. The ball is in our court. If we stay, we will experience intimacy. That's all we have to do. That's not the way a lot of human relationships work. You can do all the right things, you can try your hardest to please someone, you can bend over backwards. And you still might not get close with someone. They may end up walking away.

But Jesus tells us that if we stay, he will stay. If we abide, he will abide. That's a huge promise.

The apostle Paul references the same idea with the phrase "in Christ." That phrase shows up over 80 times in his letters. Romans 8:1 says "there is now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ* Jesus." Ephesians 1:3 says that God has "blessed us *in Christ* with every spiritual blessing." Theologians refer to this idea as the "mutual indwelling" of Christ. We dwell in him. He dwells in us.

I realize that this sounds nice in church: be friends with Jesus. But what does it really look like? What does it mean to abide in Jesus? How do we do it? Jesus isn't like my friend from college. I can't Facebook him. I can't call him up and watch a movie with him.

But friendships are all similar. You find ways to spend time together. You develop patterns of communication. It's not the same with any one person. I'm one person, but my friendships all look different depending on the other person. There are different activities that I do with different friends.

Staying in Jesus means finding those things that work for you. Sometimes in Christian settings you can get

the feeling that it's always supposed to look a certain way. I think that idea has done a lot of damage to a lot of people trying to follow Jesus. The beauty of it is that your friendship with Jesus will look different from mine. That's how friendships work.

[Scott's focus class]

There are a few elements that should always be there. Every friendship involves some form of communication. The Bible is the clearest way God speaks to us. Prayer is our chance to respond. So any friendship with Jesus is going to involve those things. But that's where the similarities end.

Stay with Jesus. Develop a unique friendship with him.

Fruit

The last thing that Jesus addresses is what happens when you do that. He has described himself—the kind of person that he is. He has described what friendship with him is like: it's intimate. That last thing he does it to describe the result of being friends with him: where it will lead. Jesus summarizes all of this in the following text.

John 15:5—

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

All the steps are outlined here: his identity, our abiding, and finally, what comes of our relationship. We've already been thinking about it, because you can't think about a vine without its fruit. A healthy vine grows grapes. A healthy friendship bears fruit.

This model of the Christian life is really different from how we often think about it. We tend to have such a performance-, academic-, and achievement-oriented way of understanding our spiritual life. We learn about God. We do great things for God. We work hard and don't give up and make great gains.

But this picture of fruit is completely different. Fruit just happens. Fruit happens. Only one thing is required: staying. Of course, there is a bunch of other stuff involved—water and sun and nutrients and stuff like that. Stuff that I'm sure viticulturists spend all their time worrying about.

But the branches don't worry about it. How can they?

They are just there. Being fruitful. It's the job of the vineyard owner to figure out all those other things. And that is God. He is the vinedresser. He is the one that ensures that fruit happens. All the branches do is to stay.

I love fruit. It is delicious. But fruit is delicious for a reason. So that it will get eaten. So that something inside it will be carried away to distant places: the seed. Fruit gives life because it is delicious. But it also gives life by bringing more life.

Fruit is life later wrapped in life now. Do you remember those hard candies called "Now and Later"? They were called that because they lasted a long time. But real fruit is even better. You enjoy it now and it results in more fruit later.

Fruit is used in Genesis as part of the command to the first friendship on earth. Their friendship was a particular kind of friendship: a romantic friendship. God told Adam and Eve to "*be fruitful and multiply.*" It's probably one of the easiest and most natural commands God has ever given.

I once had someone meet up with me to talk about young adult groups. He was part of a group that he felt wasn't dating enough. He wanted to know what I did to encourage people in our group to date. First, let me set the record straight. We work hard in our young adult fellowship to make it a genuine community of young adults who are single, married, dating, engaged, and everything in between. We are, by and large, successful. It is a place where young adults can engage in meaningful friendships.

But the by-product of young single adults in the same room is that some of them develop romantic friendships. That's good and right and how it should be. There's nothing that you need to do to make that happen. It just happens.

You don't need to tell people in love to do what it takes to make babies. It just happens. You don't need to tell branches that are connected to the vine to bear fruit. It just happens. Fruit happens when you stay. The experience of life now and the promise of life later.

In a marriage, babies is one kind of fruit that happens. But Jesus describes the more general fruit that comes out of friendship with him.

John 15:10-14—

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's

commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you.

The kind of fruit that comes from being friends with Jesus is love for other people. It’s the kind of sacrificial, other-focused awareness and engagement with other people that he calls love: fruit so rich that you would give up your own life so that someone else would live.

That’s what fruit has been doing since the beginning of time. Dying to bring life. Jesus says that when you are friends with him, you will bear that kind of fruit. You will love others the same way that Jesus loves. Friendship with Jesus results in love.

Henry Ford recognized something similar when he said, “My best friend is the one who brings out the best in me.”

But the best doesn’t come out without the best friend. Jesus is describing the result of friendship with him after his invitation to stay. But not everyone stays. Jesus doesn’t just invite. He also warns. He is clear that there will be some who don’t bear fruit.

He says in verse 2, “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away.” And again in verse 6, “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

It’s not so much of a punishment as it is an acknowledgment of what has happened. If a branch isn’t bearing fruit, then it isn’t connected to the vine. It hasn’t stayed. That’s why he says in verse 6 that if someone doesn’t remain in him, he is taken away. That person has already gone away, so Jesus says the vinedresser just completes the process.

This isn’t a threat. It’s a warning. If I tell you that I’m going to burn your house down if you don’t pay me money, that’s a threat. If I tell you that you are going to fall off a cliff if you take one more step, that’s a warning. Jesus is warning us that if we don’t remain with him, we won’t

bear fruit. And we’ll be cut off from this incredible cycle of experiencing life and reproducing life.

Don’t let that be you. There are lots of pressures that we face. Faith is hard. Faithfulness is hard. But all you have to do is stay. You don’t have to make sure that fruit happens. That’s the job of the vinedresser. A healthy friendship bears fruit. It will happen if you stay. If you stay, you will bear fruit.

Conclusion

We started off thinking about how important friendship is. We’ve heard lots of famous people offer their opinions on friendship. Even Frederick Nietzsche, who famously declared “God is dead,” valued friendship. He is quoted as saying, “Love is blind. Friendship closes its eyes.”

Friendship is a choice to stay with another person: to close your eyes to whatever would make you not stay and to choose to be faithful. This is the kind of friendship Jesus is offering. He will stay.

But his is better. He will stay, not because his eyes are closed, but because they are open. He sees us. And he invites us into friendship. What Jesus is offering in this passage is unheard of in every religion that I know of. Honestly, it is what makes Christianity seem silly and ridiculous to some people. Other religions have followers. They have disciples. They have servants. They have most of the other ways that we might talk about what it looks like to have a relationship with God.

But no one else talks about being a friend of God. Yet, Jesus invites us to be his friend. He is the vine. He is the source of life. He brings all the good things that we know. He says that friendship with him is intimate. We are known and we know him. Finally, he says that friendship with him bears fruit. Life happens now and life happens later.

All we have to do is remain in him. Don’t leave. Stay. It’s simple, but it’s hard. Just like faith.

All of us want friends. All of us want life. We want intimacy. We want to see life recreated around us. Jesus is offering his friendship—to be called a friend of God. Accept his offer. *Stay with Jesus.*