

An Exciting and Terrifying Friendship – Ben Wayman

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Today we find ourselves seated at the Last Supper with Jesus and his disciples when he drops the bomb. You all know the kind. One sentence and your life is changed for ever. “The test came back positive.” “We’re moving.” “I’m pregnant.” In similar form, Jesus tells his disciples I call you friends.[\[1\]](#)

This is what we call defining the relationship. Until this point, the disciples have insisted on calling Jesus “Rabbi,” and Jesus has called them “servants.” These are safe relationships. Boundaries are clear in these kinds of relationships. The levels of intimacy and expectation are relatively low between servants and masters, teachers and students. But friendship is a whole other story. And today we realize that friendship is what God has wanted all along.

God’s call to friendship is simultaneously the most exciting and terrifying aspect of our faith. On the one hand, friendship with God is an invitation to draw near to the heart of God, to share in the life and love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It doesn’t get any more intimate than this. Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). As Jesus’ friends, we become friends of God as we abide in the love of the Trinity.

Abiding is all about spending time together. For three years, Jesus has been abiding with his disciples. While there have been dramatic moments, much of the time consisted simply of spending time together. When we come together, Sunday after Sunday, day after day, as a community of faith, we are abiding with one another. Our moments together become a reservoir of common experience that in a time of need can turn into intimacy. And this is the terrifying aspect of our faith.

When Jesus turns to his disciples and calls them friends, he invites them into the heart of God. When someone shares their heart with you, they invite you into their deepest secrets, thoughts, and longings. Such vulnerability with another human being can be frightening because its fragility requires care and wisdom. But in God’s heart, the heart of the creator of the world who has every right to demand everything from us, the intimacy can be outright terrifying.

So I think we are justified in being terrified by Jesus’s invitation to friendship. When Jesus is only our teacher or master or the receiver of our last-minute-bail-out prayer, we don’t have to worry about all the “scary dimensions of friendship” (Sam Wells). When we don’t have to worry about being Jesus’ friend, all we have to do is sit through some sermons, serve every now and then at the prison, and send up a reckless prayer just before final exams. A formal relationship

with Jesus keeps our lives from being impinged upon by Jesus' life. That Jesus desires our friendship places us in a predicament.

Here's the predicament in a nutshell: being Jesus' friend will cost you your life. Friendship with Jesus is total – it reshapes our entire life – our friends, our family, our work, our play, our future and our past. Being friends with Jesus affects the boundaries of our relationship not only with God, but with each other.

In John's gospel, we see Peter three times disown his friendship with Jesus. The question put to Peter while he was warming himself by the fire was simple: You are not also one of his friends, are you? I am not, Peter responded. Peter was terrified to suffer on account of his friendship with Jesus. He would not, until after the Resurrection, call Jesus his friend.

Eventually, Peter owned his friendship with Jesus and experienced the terror and excitement that comes with it. In fact, I think this is exactly how Peter and his crew felt when they visited Cornelius and his household. Much to the surprise of this small Jewish sect of Jesus-followers, the Spirit obliterated their boundaries of circumcision, culture, and custom. No longer would Peter call this imperial officer with his friends and family "Gentiles"; but as baptized Christians, Peter called them "friends." And so he abided with them several more days.

If you continue reading Acts, you would find that Peter's friendship with Cornelius caused big problems for him and prompted an investigation. But Peter had become a friend of Jesus and in so doing, his life had been shaped by an unlikely friendship.

For people like me who prefer concrete examples – this is what friendship with Jesus looks like: friendship with unlikely people. Our lesson from Acts today shows what it means for us to be friends of Jesus. While the focus of the passages from John's Gospel and I John is the Christian community, in Acts we see that God's Spirit is constantly at work inviting strangers into the church's embrace.

But the church's ability to embrace a larger and larger group of people is entirely dependent upon our ability to embrace each other in love. This is where our Johannine readings highlight a terrifying dynamic of our friendship with Jesus: the command to love one another.

We have no choice. We are commanded to love one another. If we cannot love each other, we have nothing to offer the world – no embrace to share, no circle worth enlarging. Paul talks about this, the Evangelists talk about this, Jesus talks about this. God is all about love, and if we do not love one another, we are not Jesus' friends.

Would you **please turn with me to I John 4:20-22. (ask someone to read)**. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

We are commanded to love one another. We have no other option. Even if the person down the pew from you **cheated you** or **lied to you** or **used you** or **humiliated you** or **betrayed you**. You are to love them. Jesus' command that we love one another is truly terrifying and exciting. It's terrifying because we have such little personal resources for loving people who have deeply wounded us. But it's exciting because Jesus' friendship makes it possible for our lives to be shaped by love rather than hatred.

A friend recently shared with me a story that illustrates well the kind of life made possible by Jesus' friendship. He shared about a couple that went to his home church as he was growing up. Jerry was a quiet, steady figure. His wife Susan was a boisterous, theatric type. Susan had an affair with the handsome husband of the church pianist. And Jerry forgave her. Not long after, Susan had an affair with another man and left Jerry. And Jerry forgave her. After some time, Susan returned to Jerry and Jerry forgave her. They are married to this day. From conversations with others in the church my friend came to find that Jerry was not a pushover, nor was he naïve. Rather, Jerry was someone whose faith had set him free to forgive and love in the face of deep pain.

The reason why our faith conquers the world is because by being friends of Jesus we have been set free from the world's hatred. Love is a fruit that comes from Jesus, the true vine. And because it is a fruit that grows out of the very heart of God, it has the power to heal the wounds that we have inflicted on one another.

One of the most important things we do here at St Paul's is provide space to confess and forgive one another. Every morning at Morning Prayer we begin by confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness for them. Every Sunday our time of communal prayer provides space for confession, our passing of the peace provides space for forgiveness, and our sharing of Communion provides space for friendship. These practices are gifts that God gives us, the church, to love one another.

Loving one another is possible only because Jesus has called us his friends. As Jesus' friends, we abide in God's love and are set free to love one another. May we experience the joy and terror of loving God and each other.

[1] This sermon draws from Sam Wells' sermon preached 17 May 2009 at Duke Chapel.