

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2022
Scripture: John 15: 9-16 and Luke 19: 1-10

Sermon: My Friend

One of the Greek words for “**love**” is “*phileo*,” and the Greek word for “**friend**” is “*philos*,” that comes from this verb. In the New Testament, a “friend” is immediately understood as “one who loves.” There is this fundamental connection between love and friendship. Friendship was an important topic in Greek and Roman cultures in the early Church.

For Aristotle and classical philosophers, friendship was a key social relationship. Aristotle once said, “The virtuous man’s conduct is often guided by the interests of his friends and of his country, and that he will, if necessary, lay down his life in their behalf...And this is doubtless the case with those who give their lives for others; thus, they choose great nobility for themselves.” Plato also writes, “Only those who love wish to die for others.”

This line of thinking was seen during WWI and WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and Afghanistan War and, now again, as we watch what is happening in the Ukraine War as people give their lives for their friends and their country.

We don’t usually think in terms of life and death when we talk about friendship. Usually we celebrate with our friends, we eat and drink with friends, we go on vacation, to ball games, to the movies with friends, we are there when a friend is in need, but the idea of laying down one’s life for a friend is one we rarely think of.

John 15: 12-15 is the key passage on friendship. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is both the model and the source of friendship. As the source of friendship, he calls the disciples to love as he has loved. As the source of friendship, he makes possible their own friendship through what he has given them.

Jesus is teaching his disciples and us to look to the interests of others for the common good. Jesus didn't just talk about laying down his life for his friends, he actually did it. Jesus' whole incarnation from the beginning is about friendship and love for others—for us. Jesus' words aren't just a teaching, like other philosophers, but Jesus showed us what he meant by his actions.

Jesus' entire life and death was about friendship. The Good Shepherd, in John 10, lays down his life for his sheep and puts the care of the sheep above all else. The false friend will not be around in a time of crisis, but a true friend will be. Jesus is talking about himself and the love he has for us all. Jesus tells us, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord." (John 10:17-18)

Jesus is making a promise about his own life to us.

When we have friendship with Jesus, we are to model his life and also love others freely and generously with a limitless love. Jesus says, "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends."

When we are changed by Jesus, friendship lies at the heart of our Christian faith, and the love of Jesus transforms others. Jesus is a friend to us so we can be a friend to others. A genuine believer should love others with the love of Jesus no matter what.

So it is a great honor to be called a friend of Jesus and to be able to say that Jesus is my friend. In verse 16 of John 15 Jesus continues, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide." Fruit of the Spirit is the byproduct of the Christian life when we are friends of Jesus, because we abide in his love and know him as a friend.

Just as you know your friends by name and call them and talk with them, Jesus knows us by name and calls us to himself and calls us to follow him.

Jesus loves to make friends with anyone and everyone. One day as Jesus was passing through Jericho, he called to a man up in a tree. Jesus called this man by name to come down out of the tree. Jesus called to Zacchaeus when he saw him. Jesus looked up and said to him,

“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector, wealthy, and not liked by the community was going to host Jesus. People were shocked that Jesus was going to a sinner’s house. Zacchaeus came down and gladly welcomed him into his home and into his life. Zacchaeus’ life was changed that day by becoming a friend to Jesus. We don’t know if Jesus had met Zacchaeus before or if this was their first meeting. I would like to think that Jesus had met Zacchaeus briefly before on the street or had seen him hiding before, but this time, he knew Zacchaeus was ready to change his ways and become a friend of his. Jesus called his friend by his name and wanted to spend time with him. Don’t you like it when your friend calls you and wants to spend time with you?

Jesus was glad to see Zacchaeus, and this was not an interruption in his schedule. Jesus always has time for those who seek him and listen to him. Jesus saw the man behind the position of chief tax collector and wanted to build a relationship with him by going to his house for dinner.

A Scottish pastor and scholar, George Matheson, described this story as uniquely common. He said, “Zacchaeus is spectacular because he is not like other characters who encountered Christ. He was not called as the disciples were, nor was Zacchaeus suffering from some kind of affliction. What makes Zacchaeus so special is that he was an average man.” That day Zacchaeus became a friend to Jesus and Jesus boldly declared, “Salvation has come to your house!” Zacchaeus could not ignore the longing in his soul that made him climb that tree that day Jesus was passing by.

Jesus was always criticized for being with sinners and the outcast of society and the marginalized, but that is exactly who needs to be friends with Jesus. Jesus wants more friends to sit with him at his banquet table.

What or who brought Zacchaeus to the place of repentance and change of heart and change of ways?

It wasn’t the religious people in the city—he felt rejected by them. It was Jesus who welcomed Zacchaeus and wanted him to spend eternity with him as his friend.

Are you able to say, “My friend is Jesus, and he knows me by my name, and he calls to me out of the crowd to spend eternity with him”?

As Jesus’ friends we want to serve Jesus. As his friends, it means we love others, modeling his love, and serving in his name because we want to, not because we have to. A servant does things out of duty and a friend serves out of love.

Remember Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

What a friend we have in Jesus!

If Jesus isn’t your friend, ask him to be and you will always have a friend no matter where you are or what you are going through.

Jesus will forever be your friend and your Savior.