

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for May 9, 2021 ~ Easter 6B

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For Episcopalians, the term “disciples” is commonly used to refer to those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and commit themselves to follow his teachings. A disciple is a student, one who sits at the feet of a teacher and attempts to learn. It’s a good term and one we would do well to apply to ourselves with greater conviction.

However, in John’s account of the Upper Room experience, we see a turning point in the progress of the companions of Jesus. Up until this point, they have understood themselves as students and servants of Jesus. Now, Jesus tells them they have reached a new stage of spiritual development. The relationship has moved to a new level, that of friendship. It is no longer to be understood primarily in terms of teacher/student or master/servant, but in the intimacy of friendship. It is a moment of mystery as the mantle of authority is shared in the context of friendship.

Our gospel reading is taken from the low point in Jesus’ ministry. Soon, he will go to Gethsemane and on to the Cross. John does not portray Jesus’ agony. Instead, John portrays the truth about Jesus. And the truth is that in his last hours Jesus came to see his disciples in this new way. He gives them the commandment to love one another, and he says, “You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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” (John 15:14-15).

Those first disciples had planned to follow Jesus to the top of the heap and sit upon thrones in his kingdom. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, the man on top got down on the bottom and began to wash the feet of his followers --incredible! What's this all about? It was unlike anything they could have imagined. The man they thought would be king was kneeling at their feet!

It would be a while before they would discover the answer. The next day their leader was gone, and they were dispersed. Their illusions shattered and their hopes dashed, they needed some light for their darkness. That's when it happened – Jesus, the one who had called them friend, was there to brighten up this darkest of nights. Over the centuries, many of us have had the same experience – in the midst of the darkest night, we discover a needed friend.

The last couple of years have been hard on friendships. The COVID pandemic has required us to maintain physical distance from our friends and travel to visit friends has been difficult. Friends have suffered and some have died. On top of that, the polarizing political climate in our nation has damaged many friendships. How can friendship with Jesus help our friendships with one another?

Like the parable of the wedding banquet, Jesus invites the disciples to take the seats of honor saying, “Friend, come up higher.” Since in Greek the word for friend, *philos*, comes from a common verb for love, *phileō*, in the New Testament a “friend” is immediately understood as ‘one who loves. Author Gail O’day says, “This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point for reclaiming friendship as a resource for faith and ethics for contemporary Christians.”

This image of friendship with God may seem rather commonplace to some, but for many it comes as a stunning realization. We may have an image of God as judge which is turned on its ear when we see that the judge is our friend. Here are some of the things that can happen when we open ourselves to a real friendship with Jesus.

Friends want the same things. I'm not talking about superficial things like sharing tastes in food or sports. I'm not even talking about sharing common values like honesty, kindness, generosity and openness. Real friends must share themselves in such a way that the well-being of the one depends on the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the other. Friendship with Jesus means that our own happiness is bound up with the fulfillment of Jesus' deepest desires. And Jesus' deepest desire, the thing for which he gave everything, was the reconciliation of every human being to himself and to one another.

Second, friends speak their minds to each other openly, fully, and without fear. Real friends cannot withhold their true feelings, thoughts, desires, and expectations from each other and still maintain the strength and truthfulness of their relationship. In our friendship with Jesus, that means we do not worry about the suitability of our prayer. It is folly not to tell Jesus about your anger, to try to pretend that you don't have feelings you have. So much of our prayer time seems empty because we hold back everything that has meaning for us. Share your deepest desires even when you think you will disappoint your friend. Jesus can take it. That's what the Cross was all about.

Third, friends hold each other accountable. Some people think that a loving God cannot be a judging God, but real friends expect a lot of each other. What your friend does matters to you. We expect our friends to be faithful to the friendship, and to keep their promises. It is important that we spend time developing our friendship with Jesus. We cannot just assume that Jesus will go the extra mile and take care of our relationship. Jesus is not co-dependent. He never takes on more than his share of the friendship. To do so would not be helpful to us and would compromise our liberty as children of God.

Finally, friends need each other. There can be no friendship where one person is powerless and vulnerable while the other holds all the power, has no needs, and is invulnerable to hurt from the other. In Jesus, God chose to enter our lives in the flesh, so what we do matters to God. Jesus wanted his disciples to carry on his work, and he wants that from us today. Of course, he'll carry on without us, but the loss of a friendship is deeply painful to Jesus. If we want to have genuine friendship with Jesus, we must spend as much time asking what we can do for him, as we do telling him what he can do for us.

The invitation to friendship with Jesus is a challenging one. Jesus became like us, that we might become like him. Jesus has called us his friends. As Jesus' friends, we want to be like him. We want to listen and respond to him. We want to walk with him, friend with friend, to sit and rest a while, to love and be with one another, to know a peace and silence in the company of God. If we set our hearts and minds on these things, we may be better instruments for the healing of friendships and the soul of our nation and the world. And in the end, we have the promise of Job.

“As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives and at the last he will stand upon the earth. After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger” (Job 19:25-27).