

I Call You My Friends

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“*Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.*” - Leonardo da Vinci

Message

Jesus invites us into a new relationship with *himself and with God the Father* and with each other based on love and friendship. This is a relationship which will increase our joy in the Lord.

Today’s gospel reading contains one of Jesus’ most extraordinary statements. It may not have jumped out at you as extraordinary. But when you begin to think about it, it becomes more and more extraordinary. Jesus said, “You are my friends, if you love one another as I have loved you. I do not call you servants any longer, but friends.”

The concept of being friends has become a little more confused in recent years with the advent of internet-based social networking. The politics and etiquette of being friended or unfriended on Facebook inevitably change the way many, young people especially, use the language of friendship.

Facebook has changed the meanings we hear in the use of the word friend, and creating the possibility that you have a countable number of “friends” many of whom you have never met, don’t actually know anything about, and might even regard as so random that if they message you, you think of it as spam. Recently I looked at a Facebook page of someone I knew. Apart from having over 4,000 friends most of whom looked very unlike his usual real life friends they were air-brushed, beautiful, almost fictitious or imaginary. On Facebook your status is also defined, single, married etc and of course every aspect of your posts can be liked or un-liked in an instant, your views can be accepted or rejected – nothing particularly thorough about it. Likewise, Twitter reduces the serious and complex to superficial digital and momentary tweets. Perhaps following these threads of info is not your daily experience but for many it definitely is.

So, to get back to our passage, when we hear Jesus speaking of *counting* us as friends, we may need to remind ourselves that his definition is definitely a pre Facebook or ‘fakebook’, definition. Likewise, when we speak of being followers of Jesus, we may have to remember that the word follower has been similarly transformed by social networking. Following Jesus has much deeper implications.

So, what did Jesus mean by calling us friends and secondly what does he mean by His call to us to love one another as friends?

I will let you have first bite. What are the characteristics of friendship?

Being there Sharing stuff, knows your past, shares your secrets, shares your interests and pleasures etc

Jesus spells it out in a way that highlights the nature of a significant change. “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.” Jesus is pointing to a change of status. We used to be called God’s servants. Now we are called God’s friends.

To start with status. Perhaps, being a servant of God makes sense to us. It fits into our usual thinking about hierarchical social relationships. Even here in Australia where our thinking is ostensibly more egalitarian than some countries, we understand hierarchical relationships. We might not like them but we understand them. We might think like this; God is God, so God calls the shots and our job is to do what God asks of us. Similarly, when we go to work, the boss is the boss, our job is to diligently do the tasks that the boss sets for us. If we do, then we expect to keep our jobs and get paid regularly. We don’t expect the boss to count us as friends. He or she might be, but that is not the relationship that defines the relationship. It is employment that defines our relationship. Another example, at school the teacher is in charge and students are supposed to do as the teacher expects. So, these parallels add sense to our understanding of our relationship with God: a relationship defined by God’s expectations and our diligence in working to do all that is expected of us. We might think of His instructions as commandments and slip into a legalistic view of our God who states the rules or laws and expectations and dictates our duties and responsibilities.

Of course, sometimes we do trend our thinking in the opposite direction, towards grace and love. The love of God being quite removed from the feelings we would expect of a boss, a teacher or a commander. But even then, we may still think of God's love within hierarchical structures. God loves us as a parent might, but we are still very much under His authority and expected to do as we are told.

Within hierarchical frameworks the strength of the relationship is determined by a measure of our subservient effort. Does this attitude or belief and action lead to the natural conclusion?

“Well done good and faithful servant.”? This after-all is what we long to hear as our mortal lives conclude. Do we have any trouble with that? Yes, this common acclaim is recorded in the book of Matthew following a series of Jesus' parables about what His kingdom is like and who gets to enter into his joy by doing what.

Jesus in today's passage from John's gospel, turns this upside down. “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.” Yes, it is true that he said, “You are my friends if you do what I command you,” but what exactly is it that he commanding us to do as he says this?

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” It is not mindless, ritualistic, repetitive, mechanistic work, work, work, it is love, love, love. And importantly, for what I am getting at here, it is not, “If you love one another then you are my good and faithful **servants**,” but “If you love one another then you are my good and faithful friends.”

Friendship challenges hierarchy. Friendship as you all shared earlier puts us on a different level. And so usually our friends are those with whom we already feel a sense of equality. If Jesus calls us friends then no longer can the key characteristic of the relationship be about what **I do** for God. It is not about my doing stuff or even knowing stuff. If I were to judge the quality of my friendships by what my friends **do** for me, I wouldn't really be treating them as friends, would I?

So now, if Jesus is inviting us, calling us, to be his friends, **we have to find out what it means to “be” for God, instead of “do things” for God. The relationship is now to be defined by a mutual love and care, by a genuine enjoying of one another, by being there for one another.** Some of us have had a hard time coping with our human relationships so the prospect of such an invitation from God is positively strange, even terrifying. Terrifying, but wonderful too. **Imagine actually being set free from the need to prove our worth, to obey and conform and produce and achieve. Being free to love and be loved and be friends. With God and with each other!**

Jesus does link this befriending clearly with loving one another as he loved us. It is clear that this new friendship he is inviting us into with himself also extends to friendship with one another. True, let's get real, there is sometimes real tension between us, we are so different, so unique so at odds that we tell ourselves, “we don't need to like one another or even to be friends, do we, in order to love one another? Love is a commitment and a chosen action, not a feeling.” Ever heard that?

Is Jesus calling us towards an ideal that goes beyond that rationalisation, that convenient explanation or aspirational stance?

Jesus' call to love one another begins with one another in the community of faith, the congregation. Is it in this context that we are most prone to disappointing one another, letting one another down, offending one another, and infuriating one another. And yet, we do believe that we are called to be a community which intentionally draws in and welcomes those who are especially broken and in need of healing and transformation and growth. To be just, to be inclusive, Christlike,... thinking of our mission statement explorations! Is it harder for us with our high moral ground to relate gently and lovingly and graciously and achieve the sort of friendship Jesus is talking about? Do we grit our teeth and tolerate? **How do we move more closely to gladly welcoming one another as friends in relationships defined by a mutual love and care, by enjoying of one another, by “being there” for one another. Open question!!**

As we come to communion today we share a great deal of that which is essential to the Christian faith. We focus on the crux of the gospel. I use the word Crux deliberately. Strange word as it is. It meant originally in the 18th century, an instrument of torture, literally a cross or a stake. Figuratively, crux came to mean the difficult, puzzling or, in today's language the 'hard core' of the issue. So the puzzling, challenging, central action upon which we rest our faith is indeed the cross of Christ.

As part of our traditional communion service we pass 'the peace; we shake hands or acknowledge each other. 'We pledge ourselves to each another to forgive, to start afresh, to think of the cost that Jesus paid for our sins, own shortcomings, in order that we might become His friends and friends with each other. Does this help us understand how we befriend each other more deeply and genuinely?

For it is within Christ's Being; He who was, and is, and evermore shall be; that this friendship can occur. That exchange of peace is an acknowledgement that, however hard it is to imagine now, you know that it is possible that one day, the layers of hurt and defensiveness and suspicion and prickliness will be stripped away. We will truly see each other as created in the image of God, the God who embraces us as friends and who will love us into our full capacity to embrace one another as friends. For the fulfilment of such friendship and unity, we pray.

Because, Jesus calls us friends, because He has shared and continues to share the Fathers teachings with us, because we are chosen for such a purpose, empowered by the Holy Spirit to become fruitful and finally, because it is His will, we **can** be confident to pray for this. We ask, in His Name that He will continue to equip and enable us to Love one another just as He has commanded. To which we all say, Amen or So- be- it! Amen

Thought I had finished?

One last question, I've started so I'll finish and you may answer!

And what will be the result of such friendship?

I go back to my first sentence,

Message for today:-

Jesus invites us into a new relationship with himself and with each other based on love and friendship. This is a relationship which will increase our joy in the Lord.

'I have told you this so that my **joy** may be in you and that your joy may be complete. John 15 :10''