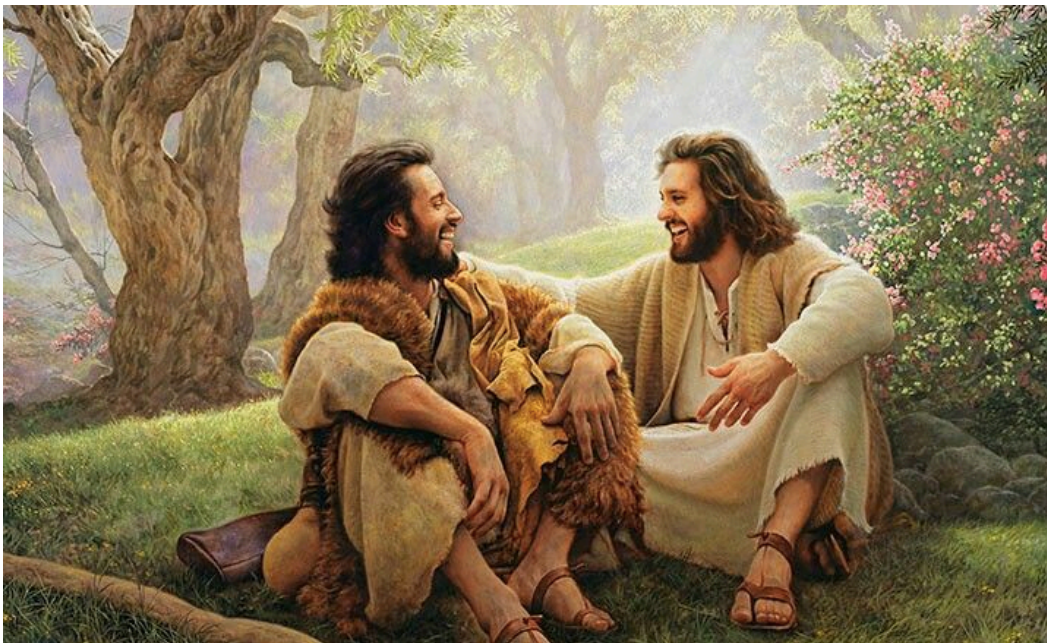

What kind of friend are you?

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 5 May 2024

Acts 10:44-48 • 1 John 5:1-6 • John 15:9-17



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

There are many kinds of friends. There are good friends, false friends, fair-weather friends; facebook friends, casual friends, BFFs. There are friends you make when you find yourself in the same place or situation, such as at work, on board a ship, or when you're part of a committee or a club. There are friends you haven't seen for a while, but you know they're there, and they'll still be your friend when you next see them or talk to them. The word "friend" gets used and misused so much that it seems sometimes to lose a bit of its meaning. How close a friend can you be with someone you've never actually met? Can you be good friends with someone with whom you have big political disagreements? Can a diehard National supporter be friends with a diehard Labour supporter? or a Greens supporter? What makes up a friendship?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus speaks about a certain kind of friendship. He is talking with his disciples about love, the love that his Father has for him, and the love that he, in turn, shows to us. It is a deep love, a life-long love, beyond any other love; it is a love to abide in, to hold and keep in our hearts.

He then talks about some other things: about joy, and about friendship. And he says some very specific things about friendship, which he relates to love.

First, he says that the love he holds for us, which comes from the Father, is greater than any other love. “Greater love has no one than this.” This love is not just talked about; it will be demonstrated. The disciples do not yet understand this; but Jesus knows to what length he will go to show his love for his people — he will go all the way to death, “even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:8) That is the measure of his friendship, the greatest he could give. Yet it is not just the death which measures the friendship. Jesus did not just throw his life away and call it love. His was a planned, conscious choice to take a particular course, a set of actions and intentions, which would end in the loving sacrifice he made. Compare this to the love of a mother for her child. While most mothers are not called upon to give their lives for their children (though a few are), the intention and the commitment are still there. A mother or father makes a choice to live his or her life in a such a way as to support and benefit the child. Many, if not most, of the decisions that good parents make are for the benefit of the child. They are in it for the long-term, at least until the child is grown up; but even after that, parents remain part of their children’s lives. They plan for the growing years and look forward to the years after, when their children are adults and the parents continue to be a guiding influence on them. Just so did Jesus plan for and know the time he would have on earth, know when the sacrifice would come, and know that he would thereafter “be with us always, until the end of the age.” (Matt 28:20) But this love is infinitely greater, though of the same kind, as the parents’ love for their children. The one who created us, who knew us before we were born, who formed us in the womb, loves us more perfectly than anyone else could love us. And our response to God must be love in return.

Jesus also speaks of friendship. This friendship is not separate from love, but a part of it. God loves us no matter what — we were made by God to please him. But in our relationship with God, there is an obligation as well. Jesus speaks of it when he says,

You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:14-15)

Jesus, speaking to his disciples (and by extension, to us), admits us into a select company: those he calls his friends. Friends, to Jesus, are not casual acquaintances; they are not facebook friends; they do not fade away when times are hard. Jesus' friends know him, and are known by him. They are admitted into his confidence, which is to say, into the Father's confidence, for those who know Jesus know the Father as well. They (and we) are part of his "inner circle," an unusual place for ordinary people to be; but then Jesus is no ordinary King. His kingship is not of this world, but of the Kingdom of God. Jesus chooses us as his friends, but he expects much from us as well. We are his friends if we do what he commands. We are his friends if we keep his commandments. And what are his commandments? You know as well as I: to love God and to love each other.

Does this sound like human friendship? Not exactly. A person does not tell her friend, "You can be my friend, as long as you do everything I tell you to." That is not human friendship. Human friendship is a relationship between equals, but we are not equal to God. The relatively modern view of Jesus as our friend, as expressed in songs such as "What a friend we have in Jesus" can be misleading. Such an expression is too sentimental and trivialises the relationship between Jesus and human beings. It is like those parents who try to be a "friend" to their children, rather than what their children really need, which is a mother or a father. What Jesus gives us is so much richer than that — the love of God the Father, expressed through the Son. This is not always a gentle relationship, but it is always a loving one. God is demanding of his creation, but because he knows us all intimately, since before we were born, he guides us in the best way possible. He guides us to "bear fruit," as Jesus puts it, which is worthy of God — to use our gifts and talents to serve the people of the world in love. In serving each other, we are following God's plan for the world according to how God made the world to work.

And so Jesus can command us to love each other, even though the idea of "commanding" love seems strange — it is our task, given us by the Father of all, who knows and loves every one of us. In following that command, we honour and show our love to the Father. Amen.