

John 15: 9-17 Disciples are now called Friends...

Last week's reading talked about Christ being the vine, and we the branches. The lesson was - staying, abiding, remaining with Jesus. Today Jesus commands us, "...to love one another as I have loved you."

There are many forms of 'love.' Love for a child, and love for a parent. Love for a stranger on the street. Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher and writer whose aim it was to discover how to "Be a Christian in Christendom." He was a great walker. He made a point of walking every day, not just for exercise or private meditation- he called his walks his "people bath." Kierkegaard would meet people everywhere. All throughout the streets of Copenhagen he engaged with people; either through a simple wave, or greeting or a long, involved debate. He *saw* everyone wherever he went, and in *seeing*, he was enriched and renewed. He loved the stranger.

Many of us feel the gift of friends at our own tables, across the country, or across the world. It's amazing to know that, in spite of the worry of these days, we can love and support each other across time and space. On this Christian Family Sunday, some of us can face-time, any time. Love for all others, even the difficult ones, is a harder calling, but maybe that makes it easier to focus on. Jesus called us into community that's going to take wise, emotional, spiritual and creative work.

"The more I think about it,
the more I feel there's nothing more artistic than to love people." *Vincent Van Gogh*

And yet, in spite of all this sustaining love we trip up.

Jesus says, "If you keep my commandments..." and, "I am giving you these commandments..." Katie Munnik wonders why John might have included these commands in his writing. Can this be right? She says this kind of feels like 'law.' Are we really commanded to love? How do we love if it's a commandment? How is that love?

The Ten Commandments are about honouring, resting, not stealing or lying, no killing or jealousy...nothing about loving. Jesus says the Ten Commandments are good and everything, and we should always follow them, but he's going to give us another commandment. Some have called this the "Christian Commandment."

We are to 'love one another' in the way Jesus loved us. It's strange to be commanded to love? Maybe it's the radical nature of this love that makes a commandment necessary. The Oxford Dictionary says the word *command* means mandate, authority, control, instruction, decree, direction. We wouldn't find ourselves saying, "I command you to love that person."

"As I have loved you." Not as duty dictates or as you might have figured out for yourself, but as Christ loved you. And the love of Christ is far richer than a love that comes from duty.

Jesuit Professor John Donahue says it's that little word that expresses one of the deepest messages in the book of John. The great gift of love comes first, making discipleship possible. Jesus then called his disciples *friends*.

The gospel of John tells us friendship is the highest form of love.

"Friends hold all things in common"

"Friends are the other selves" *(Acts)*

The idea of common heart and soul united early Christians. Friendship was expressed through hospitality; eating a meal together and being there to share another's burdens. Friendship in the mid-century Mediterranean world was a serious matter. To be considered a friend was a great honour. Being a friend was to be treated like part of the family. To be a friend meant you would look out for the welfare of the other; to consider your friend's needs as important as your own. Being a friend was reciprocal. You would respect and care for a friend, as much as they cared for you.

Jesus calls his friends into a great dance. They are to love each other as Jesus has loved them...the way God loved him. If we want to know what it means to love, as Jesus commands throughout the gospel of John, there are some clues about God's love for Jesus;

~God gives Jesus all the world (3:55) love is about generosity

~God shares everything with Jesus (5:20) love is about confidence and trust

~God gives Jesus a role to play (1:12) love is about ownership and meaning.

All of these things Jesus demonstrated to his disciples. He calls them, not servants or employees who take instruction and do as they are told, but friends, confidants. The word *friend* suggests someone who is your equal. The Jesus of John's gospel no longer uses *master and slave*, but the divine and the human. No followers are ever again to think of God as master and see themselves as slaves. They are friends. The relationship between Jesus and the disciples doesn't require the signing of a contract, but the strong bonds of friendship....and even more than friendship.

Not as individuals, but as a community of intimate brothers and sisters.

John's gospel is filled with Jesus' promises of his love for his disciples,

and commands his followers to love others, but only in this reading does Jesus complicate things by calling the disciples - friends.

Kris Lewis uses the word *complicate* because, although we recognize friendship as something very special, we might feel it's somehow less than love, less intense, less invested, maybe... But can't we love our friends? Of course.

Friendship actually makes different demands on us. While *love/loving* doesn't seem to be about choice, friendship implies more options. We love our children, our siblings, our parents because we're already in a relationship with them...it's kind of a default that we love each other (kind of, have to, maybe..?)

We talk about falling in love with our partner, something we didn't have any control over, we fall, we didn't see it coming. Human love.

Friendship is different. It's not as distinctive as a parent's love for a child. Real friendship, mature friendship isn't automatic; it's intentional, it takes time and requires commitment to be friends with those whom we care for.

In calling us friends, Jesus has given us a new name, a new story, and a new identity. Not one we've chosen, but one that has been chosen and given to us. Before we were anything else, (husband, wife, partner, uncle, aunt, grandparent, children, parents, brother, sister, grandchildren) we were Christians. Does this mean we put love for Jesus ahead of our love for our families? ?

“While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Matthew 12:46-50)

We have been caught up in his story. The more we stay and remain in Christ, in his story, the more we develop a relationship with him, the more we share life with others who are also friends of Jesus. Jesus didn't choose his friends because they had common interests with him. He didn't choose them because they had all knew John the Baptist. From a disjointed motely group of tax-collectors, women, fishermen, sinners and religious Zealots, Jesus formed a community of friends whose life together was /is rooted in and grows out of their friendship with him. Part of that community are those who were once strangers; but now are friends.

What does having a friend or being a friend mean today? A few years ago, maybe still today, (familiar?) youth were using an ‘application’ on their phones to see how many

friends they had. Having a *friend* on social media isn't like having a friend in real life. On social media you don't have to be face to face.

Friends is a number...sometimes high and sometime low, depending on how much you like the other person, what you said to each other, or what you heard about others, or yourself. Sometimes you have stayed *friends* with someone for months, but sometimes only hours. Just a click away. This period can be very confidence-making, or confidence-breaking in a young person's life. Being *friendened*, or *blocked*, or *un-friendened*, can happen all on the same day. Devastating for some youth. Bullying, self-esteem, loneliness, having a false sense of importance, all based on the *low* number, or *high* number of *friends* a person has. A very dangerous aspect of social media. Jesus formed a diverse community deliberately and carefully, so we would know for sure how it was supposed to be. How to include everyone. Forever. Jesus would never *un-friend* us. Ever.

We know that in many ways the disciples looked up to Jesus as a loving parent or a favourite teacher, asking questions, looking for approval, wanting to be cared for. Children have a very limited, or conditional view of friendship;

“I'll be your friend if you give me some of your candy.”

“I'll be your friend if you're nice to me.”

The disciples were kind of like that...still worrying about what was in it for them, what did they have to do? Are we like that? Looking for approval? Waiting for Jesus to take care of us?

Still, Jesus called them friends, without reservation, without exception, without expecting anything in return. Friends chosen to be relied on, counted on, trusted. Friendship with Jesus is a friendship of the highest level. To be a true friend, is to care about someone else's hurts and pains without thinking about the cost to ourselves, without thinking about what we might get in return.

Love is a way of life for those of us who are friends of Jesus. We wouldn't say to Jesus, “I'll love you tomorrow afternoon, I'm busy today (being selfish).”

Christian love isn't so much about what we feel toward one another, as it is about our willingness to follow Christ's example in putting another's needs before our own. Jesus himself, the only example we need.

We don't always have to like each other (whew!?), but we do have to love one another, because even as unlovable as we are, Jesus extended the love of God to us and made us, who were once strangers, *friends*.

This message contained seven words;

Jesus, Command, Love, Gift, Friend, God. Amen.