

Jesus: Our Foul Weather Friend

Proverbs

John 15: 12 – 17

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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I'd like to begin with a few quotations that define friendship.

“A real friend walks in when everyone else walks out.”

“Only a real friend will tell you your face is dirty.”

“The antidote for 50 enemies is one friend.”

“A friend is someone who knows all about you but still likes you.”

“True friends stab you in the front.”

“Friends are relatives you make for yourself.”

These quotations on friendship are all about what we expect from our friends. But Jesus turned the tables upside down when he redefined friendship as what our friends should expect from us.

Here's what Jesus said:

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (John 15:13)

The poet's and philosopher's definition of friendship from the sampling of quotations I just read tend to be rather self-centered. It's not what I can do for my friends but what my friends can do for me.

I'm not suggesting these poets and philosophers never realized friendship is a two-way street. I am suggesting these definitions of friendship pale in comparison to the descriptions of friendship found in the Old and New Testament scriptures, culminating in the life and teachings of Christ.

Read the gospels. Jesus of Nazareth was the personification of true friendship. His life was all about being a friend indeed, especially when the chips were down. He made friends with the outcast, even though it made himself an outcast from the religious establishment. He regularly partied with sinners, to the consternation of his own disciples. He touched lepers, even though it put his health in danger.

The four gospels plainly show Jesus was all about making friends by being a friend no matter the risk.

What his adversaries couldn't or wouldn't admit was Jesus' intimacy with his father compelled him to be a prodigal friend.

In John's Gospel, what happened in the Upper Room is decidedly different from the other three gospel narratives. John says nothing about the Last Supper. Instead, John begins with Jesus washing his disciples' feet, followed by a long dissertation about the purpose of his life and ministry.

The foot washing set the stage. After everyone was settled in, Jesus got up from the table, undressed and tied a towel around his waist. He then proceeded to wash the disciples' feet. Of course, they were all embarrassed.

When he finished, Jesus explained why he did what he did. He said to them, "Do you understand what I have done... if I, your teacher and Lord have washed your feet, you also want to wash one another feet." (John 12-14)

Foot washing in that time was a necessity. Since the streets were dirty, visitors were met at the door either by a servant or the youngest member of the household to wash off the filth on their feet. Apparently, when the twelve disciples tracked dirt into the Upper Room, not one of them humbled himself by being that servant.

Instead of reprimanding, Jesus turned this into a teaching moment and did the dirty job himself. To their shame, their Lord became their servant.

Then Jesus launched into his long discourse. He foretold Judas's betrayal, Peter's denial and reaffirmed he alone is the way to the Father. After promising the Holy Spirit's arrival after his departure, Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus then refined his definition of friendship.

"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 heard from my father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last... I am giving you these commandments so that you may love one another." (John 14-17)

Simply put, you are a friend of Jesus if you love God and one another.

In the Genesis creation story, the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." God didn't make us in his image us to live in isolation. Encoded into our DNA is the need for friendship.

Studies show that orphaned infants deprived of being regularly held and nurtured grow up to be emotionally unstable. Children who are ostracized on school playgrounds also experience a loneliness that has long-term ramifications.

“It’s not good that the man should be alone,” is a common sense statement recorded thousands of years before modern psychiatry. The ancients knew the importance of nurturing intimate relationships because it’s good for the soul.

It’s been said that good friendships are hard to come by. If you can count on your fingers the number of your friends you can really count on, you’re among the fortunate few.

If that’s the case, we Christians have our work cut out. The Christian’s highest priority is being a friend indeed to those in need. And Christians can learn how to be a friend indeed by growing together in the beloved community, using the Scriptures as our textbook.

Since the Old and New Testaments are all about taking care of our friendships with God and each other, I found an article, Friend, Friendship by Carl Bridges, a Professor at Union Theological Seminary was especially helpful.

He pointed out the Bible’s concept a friendship has three key ingredients: association, (by association he means being acquainted with someone else) loyalty and affection. He also states there are three types a friendship.

At the lowest level, a friend is simply someone you’re acquainted with, like the waitress at your favorite restaurant.

The next level of friendship is association plus loyalty. Think of your relationships with your coworkers. You’re all on the same team so its in your best interest to work together for the same goal.

The highest level of friendship includes association, (or acquaintanceship) loyalty and a deep affection for the other. The intimate friendship between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament is a prime example of this exceptional brand of friendship.

Here is some more of what he wrote, and I quote:

“Human friendships are based simply on our common humanity with all the joys and dangers associated with it. Human friendship brings help in times of trouble and advice in perplexing situations...”

Bridges continues, “Many show they are friends of God by becoming friends of Jesus. His open acceptance... of all kinds of people displays not simply a tendency towards human friendship but portrays the possibility of divine-human loyalty and affection... Jesus shows this kind of divine- human friendship by addressing his disciples as friends ...when Jesus tells his disciples, “You or my friends if you do what I command,” the components of association, loyalty and affection all appear.”

When you are in Christ, you enter into that same divine-human friendship Jesus offered to his disciples. But Christian friendship isn’t for Christians only. Jesus encouraged us to offer

Christian friendship to outsiders. Remember the lesson from the parable of the Good Samaritan, we are our brothers' and sisters' keeper and anyone in need is our neighbor and friend.

Christian friendship goes beyond human friendship because Christ mystically transforms the relationship. Christ's presence encourages us to experience the deepest intimacy possible between you and the other, who may or may not be Christian.

Intimacy is good for the soul. It begins with sharing your story, telling the other about your personal experiences, including your best and worst moments.

It continues on course when you're finally ready to remove your mask so the other can see the real you and you can really see the other.

Human friendships are natural. Christian friendship is supernatural and transformative. When you begin revealing yourself to a trusted friend you're no longer alone. What's more, experiencing intimacy with a trusted friend brings you closer to Christ, the giver of true and lasting friendship.

Last Sunday I asked, "Even if we see each other every Sunday, do we really know each as much as we should?"

Yes, we worship, attend meetings and classes, we even occasionally break bread together, but how often do we have transformative conversations that lead being freed from feeling alone and isolated?

I'm not saying this never happens here at Babcock, I'm only asking if it happens enough. During our brunch after worship on Pentecost Sunday, we did something different. Each of us was asked to pair up with someone you don't know to ask about our personal stories to get to know each other better. The whole exercise took no more than ten minutes. I think everyone agreed it was a good first step in building new friendships.

Next Sunday during worship we will repeat this exercise. The new question will be:

"Did you ever have a relationship with someone radically different from you, culturally, politically, or in faith and practice. If, despite your differences that person turned into a close friend, what difficulties did you overcome? What blessings did you receive?"

As a consolation prize for participating in this exercise, next week the sermon will be very short and to the point but as always, very profound. My text will come from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. I'll preach for five minutes. Then you'll be asked to pair yourself up with someone you'd like to get to know better.

This conversation will take ten minutes. When we settle down, I'm hoping one or two of you will share your findings with the rest of congregation.

Why are we doing this? To expand our circle of friends by getting to appreciate the people we worship with but still don't know.

This exercise will be transformative because Christ will be the silent but active partner in our conversations. Don't forget what Jesus said, "Whenever two or more are gathered together in my name, I will be with you."

Jesus became our foul weather friend so we can become foul weather friends with each other. The first generation of Christians knew this to be true. Why else could the Gospel spread like wild fire, changing lives and the course of human history.

If it happened then, it can happen again, if we submit to Christ as he submitted himself for us.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

That's what Christianity is all about. Christ laying down his life for us, so we can lay down our lives for each other. If we are committed to following his example, God will smile and we will be better for it.

Let us pray.