

John 15:9-17 Bill Uetricht 5.2.24 6 Easter

I would like to teach you a verse of what might be a new song for you: “I am a friend of God. I am friend of God. I am a friend of God. He calls me friend.” (sung)

It’s a remarkable image. And it’s an image that comes out of the Bible. John’s Jesus says to us today: “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.”

“You are a friend of God. You are a friend of God. You are a friend of God. He calls you friend.” (sung) Wow! It’s an image that is remarkably intimate. The disciples of Jesus are his friends. He doesn’t call them servants anymore. It’s not about hierarchy anymore. It’s about connection. It’s about intimate sharing. “I have made known to you everything that I have learned from my father.” In other words, I am letting you in on the big stuff, the deep stuff, the really important stuff. You are my friends. I am connected to you. You know my heart. You know my pain. You know my joy.

And by the way, what we are up to together is joy. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, that your joy may be complete.”

These words of Jesus are a part of what is known as the final discourse in John. These are some of Jesus’ final words before he dies. He is trying to help his disciples, his friends, deal with his upcoming death. And the words that he is sharing are meant to reassure them, to bring them joy.

Now don’t get me wrong! It’s perfectly fine to be sad around death. It’s a good thing to grieve and cry. Don’t let people convince you otherwise. Gospels like Mark and Matthew will help you embrace your sadness and grief. But in John we experience a Jesus who even in the face of death can trust joy.

Ultimately, what faith is about and what the church is about is joy. Sadly, sometimes the church makes you think that what we are about is not joyful at all, not much fun. But that's wrong on so many accounts. Some of the best times that I have had in my life I have had with these folks—people I call my friends. I've done some of my best laughing, my best dancing with these my friends. And even in times of great sorrow, joy hasn't been far away. Death cannot take away the joy that comes from deep connection.

“I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. He calls me friend.” (sung)

Jesus in John is thought to be the one who connects us to the great “I AM.” In John, you hear Jesus say, “I am the good shepherd, I am the vine, I am the way, I am the resurrection and the life.” Jesus is a window into the great “I AM.” And I AM is the Hebrew name for God, “Yahweh.” Yahweh is the to-be verb, is the life of life itself. God is not some being up there in heaven. God is the heartbeat of life, the energy of life, without whom there is no life. And Jesus reveals this heartbeat, this energy. And the “I AM” calls you friends.

Sometimes it feels like the universe is against us. Sometimes we feel friendless. Sometimes the joy of living is squeezed out of us. Jesus speaks to us today to restore our joy, so that the joy he has as one deeply connected to the father becomes our joy. He calls us friends.

The issue of friends in American culture is no small matter. An increasing number of us feel friendless. Studies show that many American adults have somewhere between two and five friends. And for men, that may be overstating the case. A lot of men have almost no friends. It's one of the reasons that some men end up in gangs, become rabid political groupies, sit behind computers, seeking out and making up conspiracy theories. Many men are lonely and often

don't know how to make friends. I am so grateful for some of the men in this church who regularly get together with other men, who want to address in a healthy way the loneliness that many of us feel.

"I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. He calls us friends." (sung) He calls us friends. We *have* friends. Friends, life isn't meant to be an experience of loneliness. We are meant to be in relationship one with another. Intimacy is our gift. Note what Jesus says today: "As the father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." There is a massive flow of love in the Jesus story. Jesus and God love each other. Jesus loves his disciples. He invites us to participate in that flow, to place ourselves in a community of love, to receive love and let it pass through us, to cause us to move in to the house of love, to live and love and breathe with our friends. "We are friends of God. He calls us friends."

Now sometimes being a friend is a lot of work. And it should be. Relationships grow and blossom when they are nurtured, when they are watered and pruned and cared for. It is hard to have a good relationship with someone if you don't spend time with that person. But before you feel burdened by this truth, hear what Jesus says about his relationship with his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

Admittedly, at first, I feel a little offended by that. I'm an American; *I* do the choosing. We specialize in choosing. We are the people of choice. (Meijer guarantees that.) But honestly, choice isn't always the good news we think it is. I experience that lack of good news in a lot of American evangelical religion, in which it is always about you and your choice. I don't know how many funerals I have been to in which I have heard the call to "make the right choice while

you are still alive.” For some brands of Christianity every week is an opportunity to make the right choice, to choose Jesus.

But Jesus says that we don’t choose him; he chooses us. Now initially that may offend me because I want to be in control. But once I get over myself, I discover how remarkably freeing that is. Frankly, I don’t always make the right choices. Honestly, I am a bad chooser sometimes. *Jesus* chooses you and me. It all begins not with us, but with him. The relationship begins with him. He initiates it. The most important things in life are not our choices but those things that we receive as gifts. In baptism, you were gifted with a special status, given a name, child of God, endowed with the Spirit, the very breath of God. You didn’t choose all of that. It was given to you.

Sometimes you wander off. Sometimes you make bad choices. Sometimes you don’t feel connected to God at all. Sometimes you have big doubts. Sometimes you are angry, and sometimes you feel deep guilt and shame. Sometimes the pain and loneliness are intense. Remember you did not choose Jesus; he chose you. Life is not about figuring it all out. Life is not about avoiding pain or conquering the negative stuff by your right choosing. Life is about God’s choice of us. It all starts there.

Now I have to say, though, that it doesn’t end there. “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit.” The story can’t stop with God’s choosing of us because this Jesus story is a flowing story. Energy flows. Energy moves. It doesn’t sit still. Love, if it is true love, can’t be contained. It will move through us to other people. You have been chosen. But you also have been appointed, to go somewhere, to bear fruit, to make a difference, a difference that will last, to help change the world.

The world is a mess, and it's because too many people get in the way of love, too many people stop the flow, too many people forget their appointment, too many don't live in light of the friendship they have with God.

“I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. He calls me friend.” (sung) You are a friend of Jesus. You have friends. God has chosen you. And God has appointed you. Now, let love flow through you to other people. Abide in love. Abide in Jesus. Remain in God. Remain in God's people, the church. A hurting world so badly needs the love that is God's gift to you and your friends.

“I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. I am a friend of God. He calls me friend.”