

John 15:9-17
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“Giving Ones Life in Love”

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There is a part of this story which is very lovely and reassuring. In a day where love is measured, and trust is tested the gospel of John gives us the assurance of life in Christ Jesus. We are loved with the undying, uncompromised love God has poured into our Savior.

We hear more wonderful words of life as Jesus calls us his friends. The philosopher Aristotle defined three levels of friendship, the third and deepest being, “The person you can just “hang” with. You don’t necessarily need a lot of words; you could call them at 3 am if you needed to. This is the... do anything for you, never hold a grudge very long, always forgive, be totally yourself, pick up where we left off after time apart, sort of friend. This is the kind of friendship Jesus calls us into. The story describes it as joy!

I encountered the power of friendship this week. Tuesday I was relaxing on the porch and my neighbor came over and started in about all the troubles in his life. He has done this hundreds of times, he treats our front porch as his own confessional, and let’s say, it has not endeared me to him. I have heard so much about his troubles, that the moment I see him head over I begin wondering if it is time to build a nice patio in our private backyard.

But, just a few minutes after he left, I went over to another neighbor’s house. We have always gotten along with these neighbors. While I was there this neighbor started telling about some of his struggles. But I noticed my attitude was different. Now, I wanted to listen. Why did I feel different about this conversation?

I realized the difference was “Friendship.” The first neighbor and I have never really become friends, not in the sense of which Christ speaks. But listening to the other neighbor was engaging because we have a friendship.

I started thinking about this element of friendship.

Jesus says something else in today’s story which has always left me feeling inadequate and frustrated as a Christian. He says, “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

The frightening part is, Jesus did this. The innocent one died on behalf of all of us. His story is told every day all around the world. He died to show us God’s undying, unmeasured love for each of us. Jesus died to make it clear God does not define us by our mistakes, but by our willingness to grow from our mistakes. Then, on Easter Morning, the most formational event in our faith, God raised Jesus to affirm that divine love, forgiveness, and deep friendship are real and true. The resurrection affirms how death, and sin, and conflict, and all the things that destroy, are never God’s final word. The final Amen won’t come until after life is born again.

Most sermons I have heard speak about giving one's life turn to history, using examples of people who literally put their life on the line; Archbishop Romero, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Teresa, Harvey Milk, and Ghandi. People who lived sacrificial lives on a large scale seem to be the ones my colleagues often hold up as ultimate examples of giving ones life away for friends.

My life and calling hasn't turned out that way. Perhaps like me, you don't find yourself in a position to be a national hero... and yet I have a deep sense that what we do each day with God's gifts of time, and money, and everything God has given us, is also faithful and valuable. Perhaps for each Mother Teresa, and Oscar Romero... there are millions of others laying down their comfort, laying down their agenda, laying aside their needs for friends, loved ones, neighbors, even strangers.

I think of a spouse sitting down after a long day at work, hoping to enjoy a refreshing beverage, contemplating the next stage of life when the phone rings. An aging parent is on the other end, and she has to decide if she will head over to the retirement apartment or care facility. So, on go the shoes and off she goes to help her parent.

I think of the busy mom or dad rearranging their whole day to come to school or preschool to pick up a child who is sick. Or the parent who would rather make dinner and relax on the patio, but life calls them to run their child to baseball, or dance, or music, or church, or Scouts or whatever.

I think of those caught in the "sandwich generation" while trying to hold their own life together, they are called to care for children/grandchildren while at the same time responding to the needs of aging parents.

And this concept of giving oneself for our "friends" doesn't end with family.

I think of the older adult still living in their own home who invites friends over for dinner somewhat hesitantly, because the conversation sometimes veers into controversial topics, yet they take a risk and make the invitation anyway.

I think of young adults who set aside time to serve their church, community or school service groups in leadership roles expanding the impact of the group. I think of youth navigating groups of friends they really like, but who sometimes propose activities to which they have to say no, even in the face of potential peer pressure, or perhaps rejection by the group.

I think of people on tight budgets who still find ways to support the church, and other concerns that they care about from their tight budget. They see supporting these organizations as a way of helping others.

I think of many Do It Yourself Home improvement folks who have left their home project undone, perhaps to the chagrin of their spouse, to go and help a neighbor with a repair issue that has come up.

These, and millions of other ways, we lay down our lives for our “friends:” stopping to give someone extra time to cross a busy road or pausing from our daily rush to help another reach an item high on a store shelf. Alongside the Romero’s, the Ghandi’s and the Mother Teresa’s of the world, this daily giving of one’s life exemplifies the divine love we celebrate and receive here at the table of grace.

We are promised today in John’s gospel, when we develop deep friendships, and understand our service through this lens of being friends in Christ Jesus, our sacrificial service with one another begins to manifest as something more. Laying down our lives, though exhausting, frustrating, and sometimes underappreciated, becomes in God’s time, resurrected as insurmountable joy.

Amen