
I Call You Friends

John 15.9-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 17, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

You're showing a child, or a colleague, or a relative how to perform a straightforward yet delicate task – threading a needle maybe, or untying a knot, or sifting flour, or following a shopping list to the very end. And time after time they make all kinds of daft but exasperating mistakes – the needle ends up on the floor, the knot is tighter than before, the flour is all over the kitchen counter, the vital ingredient is left behind at the grocery store. You grit your teeth and shake your hands like the misunderstood and underappreciated genius that you are and think “Why do I bother? I might as well do it myself!”

I wonder why Jesus bothered. I wonder why Jesus called 12 disciples. Why didn't he just do it himself? Most of the time the disciples seem to be more trouble than they're worth. If the whole point of Jesus coming was to get killed and the rise again he didn't need the disciples for that. It's a revealing question. Why did Jesus bother with the disciples at all?

At the last supper in John's version Jesus sits his disciples down and says, here's what it's all about. I'm only going to say it once. We call these words the Farewell Discourses. They go on for five chapters and fall into seven parts. The central part, part four, is the passage we've just read today. And here Jesus answers that question – why does he bother with the disciples? In fact he gives two answers. The first is joy. “I have said these things to you,” says Jesus, “so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Creation is for joy. Redemption is for joy. Salvation is for joy. Joy is maybe the only word that does justice to what God is really all about. God calls us into his company because he wants us to share his joy. That's the secret at the heart of it all. And the second answer is fruit. “I appointed you to go and bear fruit,” says Jesus, “fruit that will last.” In the end it's worth all the exasperation because what Jesus is giving to the disciples is fruit that will last. Forgiveness, healing, life eternal – these aren't self-help techniques, they're the foundations of the kingdom of God. And what's the difference between fruit and joy? The anxiety about joy is always that it won't last. Fruit is the future of joy. Fruit is joy that lasts.

And at this most poignant moment of all, the night of his betrayal and just hours before his gruesome death, Jesus tells his disciples “You're not my staff, you're not my servants, you're not my slaves – you're my friends.” In this short passage at the center of his farewell discourses Jesus tells us how he wants us to relate to him from now on. We're not to try to buy his affection or assuage our guilt by acts of service that seek some reward or recognition. We're to do what he does, be where he is, and see the way he sees, because we're to be his friends. We've already seen *why* Jesus makes us his friends – because he enjoys us and because that's how he makes fruit that will last. Now we discover the four things that matter about friendship. Here they are.

Number one, friendship abides. Jesus uses the word “abide” three times in the first two verses of today's gospel. If you read all four gospels Jesus and the disciples seem to have one adventure after another. But if you distribute those adventures over a three-year period, there must have been a lot of time, maybe most of the time, when they weren't doing a whole lot. Just abiding. I have a cartoon of a man and a gorilla sitting next to each other at a bar, and the man is putting a cheerful arm around the gorilla and saying to the bartender, “He and I go way back.” In its simplest sense, a friend is someone you've spent a lot of time with. You may not know each other well, but you've been in the same congregation, lived on the same street, taken the same class. The friendship may not have come to very much, but suddenly in a crisis it can mean a great deal. If you fall sick, or have an accident, or bump into someone unexpectedly in a foreign country, suddenly the vague acquaintance can become a genuine friend, the years of abiding can become a deeper connection of need or recognition. I'm a great believer in sending Christmas cards. I don't send them to people I see all the time; I send them to people to whom I want to say, “Our friendship is abiding right now; but I'd be happy in a crisis or change of circumstance if it became everything it once was.” That's number one: friendship abides.

Number Two, friendship is about trust. Jesus uses the word “command” or “commandment” five times in today's passage. “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” The point isn't that Jesus' friends have

memorized every tiny detail of his instructions. The point is that only in a community that keeps the rules it sets for itself can trust truly emerge. And without trust you haven't got much hope of friendship. Friendship and trust are what law is about in the Bible from the very beginning. In Exodus chapter 33 when God and Moses are hammering out the commandments at Mt Sinai, it says, "the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." The laws are there in the Bible to help us discover what it means to be friends of God and friends of one another. To say someone's a friend is to say you expect from them and they from you a level of trust and an expectation of certain levels of civility beyond what one might expect of a stranger. "I thought you were a friend." When one hears those words there's a profound sadness because there's a recognition that some level of mutual expectation has been broken, even if it's never been precisely articulated. When a married couple divorces and says "we've managed to remain friends" they're saying despite our differences we still have a level of respect for one another and there's still a code of understanding there we can rely on and take for granted. That's number two: friendship trusts.

Number three, friendship is about intimacy. Jesus says, "I don't call you servants any longer, because the servant doesn't know what the master's doing; but I've called you friends, because I've made known to you everything that I've heard from my Father." Jesus has been around the disciples a long time, he trusts them; and so it's time to let them in on the whole secret. These are special moments in friendship. "I guess you ought to know my father spent a long time in prison." "I just wanted to tell you that I had Martha before I married Bill. Bill's always treated Martha the same as the others but I just felt like I wanted you to know." Friendship is about knowledge, about understanding, about sharing the unknown and the fragile and together groping towards the true and the hopeful. That's number three: friendship is intimate.

And then we get the big one. Number four, friendship is about sacrifice. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." This is precisely what Jesus is about to do – even though he's about to die for friends who don't really understand why. Which makes his sacrifice all the greater.

Let's look at friendship as sacrifice a bit more closely. What would *you* lay down your life for? Or perhaps better, *who* would you lay down your life for? There's no point in saying nothing or nobody. Because we shall all lay down our life, sooner or later. If you lay down your life for a cause or person you've done the biggest thing a friend can do. Who are you going to die for? Now's the time to ask the question, because when it comes to the laying down it may happen very suddenly and you may not have a whole lot of time to figure out the answer. What's the best way to die? Jesus gives a simple answer: the best way to die is to die for a friend.

I want to pause for a moment to think a little more about these four dimensions of friendship. Who comes to mind for you when I say the word "abiding"? Who comes to mind for you when I say the word "trusting"? Who comes to mind when I say the word "intimate"? Who comes to mind when I say the word "sacrifice"? I wonder if there's anybody who genuinely fits all four. Friendship gets confusing when these four aspects fail to overlap – when you've got trust and intimacy but no abiding, which is where you impulsively decide this person you just met is the most amazing person ever; or when you've got intimacy but suddenly realize there's no trust, which can feel terrifying and very vulnerable, and close to betrayal; or where there's trust but you can't or can't any longer find any intimacy, which is where a friendship can somehow dry up. Friendship leads to misunderstanding when one person only really wants or knows how to give the intimacy thing while the other only really wants or knows how to give the trust thing. And most amazing of all, sometimes you realize someone has made an incredible sacrifice for you when you really didn't know them all that well.

In reality we hardly ever get all four dimensions of friendship with the same person at the same time. And that's ok – in fact it's healthy, because to expect a friendship to be abiding, trusting, intimate, and sacrificial all at one go is probably putting more weight on it than one friendship can bear.

But the thing we should also realize is that the same goes for our friendship with God. There'll be times when that friendship is abiding, like a computer screen switched to hibernate mode. God will sometimes just be there, not dramatic, not intense, just there, abiding, sticking around. And then there'll be times when God is constant. A child was famously asked the question "Is there anything God can't do?" and the child answered "God can't stop loving us." That's what it means for God to keep his own commandments. That's what it means to have a trusting friendship with God. And then there'll be times when God is intimate with us, when we feel the reality of God more significantly than any other feeling, even if that intimacy is sometimes disturbing as

well as reassuring. But that won't be all the time. And of course there'll be times when we know the sacrificial friendship of God, when the words "Christ died for me" won't be words on a page or in a song but will be the wind beneath our wings and the air of every breath we take.

But the truth is we sometimes miss each of these aspects of friendship with God. Sometimes we'd love it if God was just abiding, but he doesn't seem to be. We feel like saying "God and I are on just Christmas card terms right now." Sometimes we lose our sense of trust when God seems to do something or let something happen that seems contrary to his character. Sometimes we feel far from intimate with God – distant, even. Sometimes it feels like we're the ones making all the sacrifice and laying down our lives and getting nothing back. But not usually all four at the same time. Our friendship with God is at least as complex and as multidimensional as our other friendships. But God still calls us his friends. He doesn't mind being seen in public with us. He wants us to know his very heart. He'll take any level of friendship we're willing to offer. Any time.

Jesus doesn't call us his servants. But he also doesn't call us his clients. And the reason is because these kinds of formal relationships are ways of avoiding the scary dimensions of friendship. To serve someone or to be served by someone means you don't have to be their friend. You don't have to abide, you don't have to trust, you don't have to be intimate, you don't have to sacrifice – you can just do your piece and walk away unscathed. If we called it an offer of friendship it would be a whole lot more frightening. It might have to go on a long time, it might have to be within rules that are mutually agreed, it might mean an intimacy that means I could be changed. I could be hurt. I could experience a personal cost. It might involve sacrifice. It might end up becoming the center of my life.

Scary word, friendship. You can see why we stick to service. Much safer. Suddenly we can see why Jesus leaves it till the night before his death to tell his disciples who they really are.

And that brings us back to the question we started with. Why *did* Jesus call 12 disciples? Why didn't he just do it all himself? It wasn't because the order book was crammed full and he needed extra staff. The reason is because he didn't want his big secret to be a secret forever. His big secret, scary as it may be, is that we have been invited to share the very life of God. Not to bring it about like servants or to buy our way into it like clients. But to share it – the wonderful parts and the painful parts – to share it as friends. To be a disciple is to abide in Jesus, to trust and be trusted by Jesus, to be intimate with Jesus, and finally to lay down your life for him as he does for you. That's what it means to be God's friend. It's the only way to joy. It's the only way to make fruit that will last.