

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



John 15:9-17 *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

Who is your best friend? Your best friend in the whole wide world—do you have someone like that in your life? I would guess that if I were to go around and ask that individually of each of you, the younger members of our congregation would probably excitedly offer up an answer. But if I worked my way through the congregation and the age of my respondents grew older and older, I'm guessing that you might have to stop to think and consider if you even have a best friend or who that might be. That's how friendships seem to work. When you're young, everyone's your friend and best friends are easy to come by. But as you grow older, *true* friends just become fewer and fewer—and that's life.

Now, we probably all remember a time when we had a best friend, perhaps even a group of best friends. Maybe in high school you had that group of friends with whom you did absolutely everything. But having such a group of friends, as wonderful as that comradery might be, there's also some insecurity that often comes with it. You probably, at one time, stewed over questions like, "Do they feel the same way about me as I feel about them?" Or "Are they talking about me when I'm not around?" Or perhaps "I consider her *my* best friend, but does *she* consider me *her* best friend?" Those worries, those insecurities, they are terrifying to consider, and they're very common.

The truth is, when you feel friendly toward someone else, that feeling needs to be reciprocated in order for it to be termed a friendship. Otherwise, unrequited love means you've just been fooling yourself. And if we're taking the time to consider our friendships with one another, we also ought to consider our friendship with Jesus. Perhaps you've wondered: "Does He really love me?" "What does He think about me?" "Does Jesus really consider me a friend, or am I just fooling myself?"

While you may have had those same questions regarding your earthly friends, you do not need to wonder them about Jesus. For the One whose mouth contains deceit declares that He is your friend. And even when *you* haven't returned the feelings, He still has love for you. Our theme for the day is:

"What a Friend We Have in Jesus!"

- I. Jesus is my friend—even when I don't love Him
- II. I can be Jesus' friend—when I love my friends

There are lots of theories about where friendships come from. You know, like the proverb, "Birds of a feather flock together." You become friends with people who are just like you. But then there are conflicting theories like, "Opposites attract," meaning that sometimes it's the differences that draw

two people together. I don't know which of those two theories holds more water, but I can say for certain that every friendship is about love. Similar or dissimilar, all friendships revolve around love. But in which direction is that love facing? That's the difference-maker. There are those friendships where the love is focused towards the other person, in which you truly care about them. And there are those friendships, and we've all had them, where all that love is focused right towards me.

The famous philosopher Aristotle wrote a book on ethics called *Nicomachian Ethics*, and in it he has an entire chapter dedicated to friendship. He distinguishes between three types of friendships, into which every relationship may fall. The first category is "friends of utility." Think of the friend with the pickup truck. The two of you get along pretty well, but you really reach out to him only when you need to transport a piece of furniture or a large appliance. The second category is "friends of pleasure." Think of the high school class clown. Everyone is friends with the class clown because he's hilarious. You gain a lot of pleasure from laughing at his hijinks, but the friendship is only surface level. With each of these first two categories of friendships, the love is focused squarely on me. You are really only friends with them so long as they can serve some purpose for you.

But the third category is "friends of love." This is the rarest of all friendships. It involves two people who are both more concerned for each other's interests than their own. Ironically, this is the one friendship from which you actually gain the most, even though you're also giving the most. And it's this loving kind of friendship into which Jesus welcomes His disciples, and you and me, in our text this morning. He begins by saying, "***As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.***"

That's a pretty shocking level of love, if you think about it. Just as much as the eternal Father loves the eternal Son, together with the Holy Spirit—one God, the God who is love—in that same manner Jesus also loves you. And that's especially surprising when you consider what type of friends we have been to Jesus. Which direction is our love most often facing when it comes to our relationship with God? It's focused squarely back at us, is it not? How often do we treat Jesus just like the friend with a pickup truck? We reach out to Him when we really need something from Him, but the rest of the time we're just too busy to spend much time with Him. Here Jesus is inviting us into His circle of friendship and love, and so often that is an unrequited love on our end. We often leave Him hanging.

And yet He still loves us. And He still considers us His friends. We can still sing, "***What a Friend We Have in Jesus.***" For ***Jesus is my friend—even when I don't love Him.*** There's a perfect example of that dynamic going on here in our text. After declaring that He loves us and that we are his friends, He says, "***Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.***" Do you know *to whom* He first said these words or *when* He said them? You probably assumed it was to His disciples, and you're correct on that account. But it's the "when" that's really interesting. He's saying this as He and His disciples take an evening stroll outside the city walls to a Garden called Gethsemane. His friends didn't know it, but this is the night in which He would be betrayed, arrested, tried, and within 24 hours be nailed to a cross. "***Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down His life for His friends,***" Jesus says. And that's exactly what He was about to do. So that His disciples would not need to die, so that you and I would not need to face God's wrath over our sins, over our selfishness—He laid down His life for His friends. And that definitely includes you and me.

And yet, I must confess, every time I've read this passage, I've always thought that Jesus got it wrong. "***Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down His life for His friends.***" I don't know about you, but I can think of a show of love that would be even greater, at least in my estimation. That would be laying down your life for your enemies! That's the direction the Apostle Paul goes

when he writes to the Romans, ***“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** A few verses later, ***“While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.”*** (Romans 5:8,10) Why didn’t Jesus say that? It’s one thing to lay down your life in the place of your friend, someone you love and who loves you back. It’s another thing entirely to lay down your life for an enemy, a person that despises you. And that’s really what Jesus did anyways, so why would He say, ***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down His life for His friends”?***

Well, His whole point is that He considers even His enemies to be His friends. Knowing, as we do, that Jesus is walking into His arrest and crucifixion as He’s saying these words, we can also review some of that evening’s events surrounding His so-called friends. Jesus is about to be betrayed and arrested by an armed mob, and what do His friends do? They run away, leaving Jesus alone. Some friends! Just a few hours before this, a dear friend—a close confidant—had left the pleasant company of His Rabbi to go sleuthing through the night by leading that armed mob to Jesus, just so he could make a few bucks. Some friend! A few hours after this Peter would curse and swear and loudly make any sort of claim that would distance his name from Jesus, just to save his own skin. Some friend.

That’s the group with whom Jesus is walking. He knows what’s going to happen. He knows these “friends” of His would be treating Him as nothing more than a friend of utility or of pleasure, there when they needed Him but not to be counted on for anything else. And yet He says, ***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down His life for His friends.”*** Jesus considers even His enemies to be His friends. For “His friends” means not those who love *Him*, but those whom *He* loves.

We could not claim to be any better friends to Jesus than His disciples were to Him, but we can still claim that Jesus is *our* friend. He’s been our friend in *our* hour of greatest need, therefore He’s our friend indeed. In His laying down His life—His dying on the cross—you get to see the truth of ***“What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”*** ***Jesus is my friend—even when I don’t love Him.*** In spite of our failures to love Him back, He loves us still. He laid down His life for us in order to forgive us, so that we might actually be friends to Him as well.

That means that rather than this being a one-sided relationship ***I can be Jesus’ friend—when I love my friends.*** That’s what He means when He says, ***“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you . . . You are my friends if you do what I command you.”*** Notice, He doesn’t say “I will be *your* friend, if you do what I command you.” His friendship towards us is not contingent on our obedience. He does not love those who are worthy of His love, He loves you and me even though we are totally unlovable. He does not befriend those who are good friends back to Him, but rather befriends those who ought to have no friends in the world. He has declared Himself our friend already, our very good friend in every need. And we can be His friends too, if we do what He commands us. His command is simply that we love one another.

In his book *The Four Loves*, the renowned Christian author C.S. Lewis notes the distinction between lovers and friends. He says, *“Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends [stand] side by side, absorbed in some common interest.”* To be a friend back to Jesus means to stand side by side with Him and look at others in the same way that He looks at them—the same way He looks at you—which is with delight. That doesn’t come naturally to us, does it?

Thinking back to your middle school and high school days, when friends were plentiful, your looking around at others was likely rarely filled with delight. Instead—jealousy, envy, distrust—those tend to be the colorations of our viewpoint when we’re at that insecure stage of life. When we’re focused on ourselves, we tend to lament that we’re not like so-and-so in our looks, or talents, or whatever it is.

But when you have the friend-eyes of Jesus, you don't view others as a threat to you because they *are* what you *are not*. Instead, those differences may be the very source of the delight in those people. Think about it this way: He only made one of each of us. Each one of us is ***"fearfully and wonderfully made."*** (Psalm 139:14) There are no repeats, no re-treads, no carbon copies. And so, each individual may be a unique source of joy and delight that you cannot find in any other. Just as God has a unique calling and purpose for each of you, so He has for everyone around you. And so those differences, those are the very things which we can rejoice in.

Although, again, it doesn't come naturally. Certainly, we carry not-so-friendly eyes in our eye sockets, and do look around us with envy or jealousy or contempt or bitterness. Yes, Jesus loves us as friends even when we are not His friends, but our friendships and love often require those individuals to be friendly and loving toward us. If they are not, then we retract our love from them. Again, this is due to that inward facing love that comes so naturally to us. How can we turn our love and attention away from ourselves and aim it at one another? How can we love and befriend even if we are not initially getting the same back in return?

Well, it all depends on Jesus. As He says near the end of our text, ***"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you."*** It's really an overestimation of ourselves that leads us to be unwilling to forgive or to love or to be patient or to befriend the people around us. But let's not make the mistake of thinking that "Jesus is my friend because of who I am." Rather, Jesus is my friend because of who *He* is. I did not choose Him; He chose me.

That's one of the beautiful proclamations that infant baptism makes. In many circles of Christianity, baptism has been turned into nothing more than, "Me choosing Jesus." But Jesus says, ***"You did not choose me, but I chose you."*** As a newborn infant brought to the baptismal waters has no power to decide what happens next, so none of us have the power to choose Jesus to be our friend. But all the same, Jesus has chosen each one of us.

There's a Lutheran Baptismal prayer in the Old Lutheran Book of Prayer, which goes like this, *"Oh Lord, you insisted on having me, even though you knew the end of my life as well as it's beginning, its failures as well as its successes, its shame as well as its glory."* Certainly, none of this was hidden from your Savior's eyes, and yet He chose you anyway. He chose you because you were the object of His delight. He chose you so that you could be brought into His own special family, so that you could go to the Father with any request and trust that He would hear you.

While this certainly has benefits for many areas of our lives, may our requests before the Father's throne of grace also include the prayer that the Lord help us to be friends to one another—to love, to forgive, to bear, to believe, to endure. How could we not desire to show such love, when God has given us the joy and privilege to sing, ***"What a Friend We Have in Jesus."*** Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 4:7) Amen.

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh
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