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Who Is My Friend

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It has been called rare, precious, and beautiful. The 13th century scholar and theologian Thomas Aquinas called it the most valuable thing in all the world. It has been credited with saving lives and has been called the greatest gift besides life itself. It is often a main theme in great works of literature, as well as in comic books, novels, movies, TV Shows and songs. We can easily see it between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson; in Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, even in Scarlett O'Hara and Melanie Hamilton from *Gone with the Wind*. Or in Captain James T. Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek*, Lucy and Ethel from the *I Love Lucy Show* or Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. We can't forget Athos, Porthos, and Aramis, those *Three Musketeers* who came to embody it or Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. My generation recognized it in the comic book strip Calvin and Hobbes, R2D2 and C3PO from *Star Wars*, Woody and Buzz from *Toy Story*, and of course Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger from the immensely popular *Harry Potter* books and movies.

You probably have other examples, but of course, by now I'm sure you recognize I am talking about friendship. Friendship can be tricky to define: it is a form of love, but not romantic (though it is often a precursor to romantic love), and it is not familial (although family members might be as close as friends). It is a mutuality, a comradeship, a deep connection that is intimate without being sexual. Yet despite being tricky to define, we can find examples of friendships everywhere we look, including the Bible. From David and Jonathan, to Naomi and Ruth, to Jesus and Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus. The stories of these friendships are beautiful and powerful, but perhaps the most meaningful friendship of all from the Bible is the one we just heard in the Gospel this morning, where Jesus called his disciples, his friends.

This part of John's Gospel we just heard is part of a very long speech Jesus gave called his "Farewell discourse" because he gave it right before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. Not unlike the Doctor in the long running British science fiction TV show *Doctor Who*, who often gives a long soliloquy before he regenerates. The purpose for these long speeches in *Doctor Who* is to give fans the chance to say goodbye to the actor who played the part of the Doctor before a new actor takes over the role; it's a way of acknowledging a major change or transition in the show. The author of John is doing something similar; trying to help those of us who follow Jesus recognize an important transition is about to take place, that Jesus is about to

suffer greatly and unjustly, will die and will rise again not so things will be able to return to “normal” or to the way things were before those events, but to help his followers move into what those events create: a new relationship with Jesus.

After his resurrection Jesus isn't just a generous feeder of thousands, or a miracle worker who can turn water into wine and heal all forms of illness; he isn't just a teacher or good storyteller, or someone who isn't afraid to stand up to the religious leaders of the day. If you remember, during Jesus' ministry his disciples fulfilled the role of followers, they listened, pretty much did as he asked them, but often failed to understand what Jesus was really up to as the Messiah. In today's section of John's Gospel, Jesus told his followers what he was up to: changing the relationship between God and people from servant to friend.

This change is significant because we human beings aren't much used to a God who wants to be friends. We are much too hierarchical a people for such thoughts. We can find great comfort in the kind of hierarchy where the powerful are over the powerless, however that looks. Of course, not all of us might like such a system, and there are those of us who advocate for changes, but we've learned that is a tough system to break into, as there are plenty of people who for so many reasons struggle to imagine another way of being.

Yet that is what Jesus was saying when he called his disciples his friends, for in so doing, Jesus was saying he was no longer a hierarchical figure over them, dictating to them, demanding results and punishing when they didn't deliver. That's not how friends are. Friends, like all the examples I gave at the beginning of this sermon, are people who are in it together, who are much more about doing whatever they have set out to do together than they are worrying about who is the boss.

In his book called *The Four Loves* originally published in 1960 C. S. Lewis wrote a great deal about friendship, the nature and value of it, and how he felt concerned that the concept of friendship, while celebrated in literature, was often downplayed or dismissed in real life because friendship does not have the same purpose as romantic love or the affection between parents and children. Lewis wrote that he was often frustrated that people tried to interpret all deep friendships as secret romantic relationships, which he believed diminished both the romantic love and the friendship. Today we might be frustrated that the concept of friendship has been even more eroded into something far more casual, where the term is used to describe those you allow access to your Facebook page to customers of a business, to strangers. I've received form letters or emails from people I've never met addressing me as “friend”.

Such an erosion of the word friend most likely troubled C.S. Lewis because he recognized and valued the friendships in his life, and his essay reminds us of the deep truths of friendships. He wrote deep, meaningful friendships don't have the same kind of purpose as a lover's relationship or family's relationship. Friendship isn't about creating new life and raising children into adults. Friendship isn't about making a financial profit or getting ahead in the world. Friendship, Lewis wrote, is more like what happens when two or three or more people who have some common interest come together in order to share their love and enthusiasm for whatever they are interested in, and just to be together. Lewis wrote that while an image of lovers is standing face to face, gazing into each other's eyes, friends stand side by side, knowing each other and moving toward the same goal together. Lewis also wrote that one of the great values of friendship is there is no hierarchy to maintain, which means those in the friendship can relax and just be together, enjoying each other's company without fear or worry of upsetting anyone.

That is why, Lewis explained, true friendships are rare, as there may be many kinds of relationships, but there are few that are so willing to accept each other for who and what they are and can exist without jealousy, fear, or shame. For C.S. Lewis, friendship like that were holy; a divine experience of the risen Jesus, and the Kingdom of God.

That is why what Jesus said in today's Gospel is so monumental when he called his disciples friends. He was describing the relationship with those who follow him as one based on this extraordinary kind of love, love without shame or fear or jealousy, love that makes room, love that laughs together, celebrates together, plays together, and together walks through difficult or painful situations without judgment or shame. Love that exemplifies the ways of Jesus not as burdensome rules to follow but as the commonality we share as friends of Jesus.

There is a popular song from the 1980's called *That's What Friends are For* that has a line in it that has served as a good definition of friendship for me: "Knowing you can always count on me." Knowing in this instance means more than recognizing or remembering; it is understanding the complexities of a person and standing with that person, it is a way of loving a person and being loved by them. For that is one of the most important aspects of friendship: it can't be a one-way relationship, it is receiving as much as it is giving.

One place this idea of friendship with Jesus culminates in our worship services is in the burial service, where there is a line in the opening anthem that says, "I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger." Jesus is the friend we can count on to know us; to know us as a congregation and as individuals. A

friend who knows us for all our complexities, for our past, our mistakes, our failures, our dreams, our successes, our moments of hope, for the good we've done and the hurt we've caused, the times we changed, the ways we helped each other through tough times, when we've grown, and the times we didn't have it in us, the ways we lived into being Jesus' friend, and times we weren't the best friends we could be. And through it all, we can count on Jesus knowing us, being with us.

Such knowing is more than a comfort, it is as empowering, and hope filled as any friendship. For this is the kind of holy love the world is literally starving for right now. I've read report after report from insurance companies and psychologists and psychotherapists that state more and more people of all ages are seeking treatment for loneliness. For in a time when the term friendship has been so diluted, when more people are more worried about getting ahead than they are in forming true friendships, it should be no surprise that deep, meaningful connections are becoming rarer and rarer. And while there is no easy solution to the crisis of loneliness, there is something friends of Jesus can do: we can show the world true friendship is possible by living our friendship with Jesus; we can be better at recognizing those diluted forms of friendship for what they are, and we can help teach by example how to make friends and be friends by treating true friendship as something holy instead of a method of getting ahead.

While the idea of the Son of God being our friend and being friends with Jesus might be new or challenging, it is part of the message of Easter and the Resurrection, and being given such a powerful and holy love to receive and share is certainly a joyful reason for exclaiming alleluia.