

Friend of Jesus

John 15:12-17

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“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 because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:5).

From servant to friend: it sounds like a promotion, but is it?

Fred Craddock used to tell this story:

“A combination of misfortunes put me in the fortunate position to hear the sermon. A cancelled flight; a last-minute reservation in a motel near the airport; a search for a church within walking distance, since the next morning was Sunday; a housekeeper at the motel pointing in the direction of one six blocks away; my arrival at a cinderblock building in which a few tired souls had already begun singing gospel songs.

The preacher, a large man, made painfully awkward by a number of maladies, including poor eyesight, moved to the pulpit and read in crippled speech his sermon text: ‘Abraham was called a friend of God’ (James 2:23). His opening words were, ‘Abraham was a friend of God. I’m sure glad I am *not* a friend of God.’ His sermon was an explanation of why he was pleased not to be a friend of God.

I cannot recall being so engaged in a sermon. His delivery was without animation; his physical condition denied him that. His speech was a bit halting, but each word was clear and pronounced with respect. All of us in the small congregation were helping him preach by our total silence and attention to what he said.

He recalled the story of Abraham, pilgrim and wanderer, who, after years of homelessness, died and was buried in a land not his own. ‘Abraham was a friend of God,’ he said; ‘I’m glad I’m not.’

He then spoke of others who had been called friends of God, faithful in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword. He concluded with a story of Teresa of Avila, remembered by the church as a friend of God. He recalled her begging in public to raise funds for an orphanage. After a series of setbacks — flood, storm, and fire repeatedly destroying the orphanage — Teresa in her evening prayers said to God, ‘So this is how you treat your friends; no wonder you have so few.’

The sermon closed with counsel: If you find yourself being drawn into the inner circle of the friends of God, blessed are you. But pray for the strength to bear the burden of it” (*Craddock Stories*, 189-190).

No longer servants, but friends... but is it a promotion you want?

The *call* in this passage is to love — *that* is the test of a friend: “This is my new commandment,” says Jesus, “that you love one another as I have loved you... You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12, 14).

And the *model* of that love is that of the Father’s love for the son: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9).

So the *call* is to love and the *model* is the Father’s love for the son — but have you ever stopped to consider what the Father’s love for the son actually looked like? How did the Father love Jesus?

“Peril at every turn, demons to be cast out, the sick pulling on him, crowds pressing, a woman yanking the hem of his garment, no roof over his head...”

The pastor, James Howell, says, “We might wish Jesus had said something else, like: ‘As the Father has love me...well, I will spare you all of that; I will love you differently; I will let you live on an island of ease and weave a spell of protection around you’” (“As the Father Has Loved Me,” *Day 1*, May 17, 2009).

If the *call* to be a friend is rooted in love and the *model* of that love is the Father’s love of the son, is it a promotion that we really want?

Maybe before we accept that promotion, we might want Jesus to re-write the definition of “friendship” in that contract. Maybe we want it to be more like the kind of friendship that doesn’t require so much of us, doesn’t hold us accountable, doesn’t expect us to be the best version of ourselves. Maybe we want it be the kind of friendship that makes us feel good just the way we are.

The ancient Greek Philosopher, Aristotle, who lived nearly 400 years before Jesus ever set foot on the earth, had a lot to say about friendship. Do you know what he said about the kind of friend who only ever make us feel good about ourselves?

Aristotle said, “The opposite of a friend is a flatterer.”

That’s a because flatterers don’t help us *grow*. They don’t call us on our missteps or failures. They don’t push us in worthy and worthwhile directions. They tell us we’re great just like we are — even when deep down we know that isn’t true.

Friends do the opposite. They don’t flatter us; they *encourage* us, which at its most elemental definition means “to put courage into.” Friends put the courage in us to grow, to admit our failures and learn from mistakes, to do better, to be better. Friends put the courage into us to become the best version of ourselves.

I hope we all have at least one or two people in our lives who are these kinds of friends for us. I suspect that if you were to pause for even a moment, their faces might appear to your mind's eye. They are the ones who have most profoundly shaped who you are and who you hope to be. Often, they were the ones who "showed up" when life was hardest and no one else seemed to care. They are the people we model our own lives after. That is a promotion they didn't ask for, but one they earned by simply being a genuine friend to us.

Maybe some of those people are sitting in this room with you right now.

David Cunningham says it like this: "A true friend who loves as God loves, will, in time, teach *us* how to love as God loves" (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B: Vol. 2, 500).

My mom is a friend of Jesus. (It's Mother's Day. You didn't think I wasn't going to tell a "mom" story, did you?)

When I was a kid, mom served as the director of our church's discipleship group for teenage girls. Almost immediately, she developed a rapport with several young women from all over town. She called them "her girls."

She would drive all over town and pick them up in our old Chevrolet Celebrity station wagon and haul them to and from church several times a week. In fact, mom would drop us off at church early, so that she could do a second run and go pick up "her girls." So me and my brothers would kick rocks in the church parking lot, waiting in the cold for someone with a key to arrive so that we could get into the warmth of the church building.

Mom's "girls" typically shared one all-too-common trait — they all lived within the confines of great need. Usually, that need was financial, but sometimes it was the need for someone to simply provide loving attention or to set clear and acceptable boundaries. Whatever the case, they *all* had need — need I understood nothing about.

So one summer day, as my brother and I were playing out in the front yard, mom walked out and headed for the car. "It must be Tuesday," I muttered to myself. "Mom's going to get her strays." That's what I called her girls — her strays.

Sure enough, an hour later, mom returned with a car full of girls — and, to my dismay, they all had in their hands big, huge, beautiful ice cream cones from the local ice cream shop! I immediately began throwing a tantrum, in front of God and everybody, about how unfair it was that she would buy ice cream for all of these girls and not even get anything for us, her own children.

Mom's mouth tightened and she gave me that look that somehow made it seem as if the whole world had fallen silent. I could tell by the look on her face that she was somewhere between infuriated by my behavior and heartbroken by my attitude.

She came straight toward me and kneeled down to make sure that I and no one else could hear what she was about to say. “Daniel,” she said, “Most of these girls have nothing. This may be the only time some of them get an ice cream cone this entire year. You have ice cream all the time. Now, which one would you like to ask to give up their cone for you?” I had no response – and that turned out to be the right one.

Mom would often tell us that Christians looked most like Christ when we were extending a hand of love to the most forgotten people. To this day, my mom would never, *never* call me her friend or allow me to call her my friend. She is my mom. I am her son, *not* her friend.

But, mom is friends with Jesus. She modeled it with her life, and her model made me want to be friends with Jesus, too.

When the well-known New Testament scholar and medical doctor, Albert Schweitzer, was asked why he chose to give up a life of elite privilege in order to labor in the Lambaréné mission hospital buried in the jungles along the Ogowe river, deep in the Belgian Congo, he replied, “I have decided to make my life my argument.” They’re not my mom’s words, but they easily could have been.

But even my mom would confess that Jesus’ measure of friendship is almost impossibly high: “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down your life for your friends” (John 15:13).

As we well know, Jesus did not say those words casually or carelessly. Like Schweitzer, he decided to make his life his argument – even when it meant laying down his life.

I suspect that I still have a long ways to go before I am able to be the kind of friend to Jesus that he has been for me. It’s so easy to sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus,” but still so hard to sing, “What a friend Jesus has in *me*.”

But I do find myself *hoping* to be a friend of Jesus – and that is where it starts, I think... and not where it ends.

In 2011, Candy Chang “painted the side of an abandoned house in her New Orleans neighborhood. She had lost someone she loved and was dealing with depression when she used chalkboard paint and stenciled a frame with the sentence ‘Before I die I want to _____.’ Anybody walking by could pick up a piece of chalk and share a dream.

By the next day, the wall was full of responses. Before I die I want to... Sing a song for millions. Plant a tree. Play the piano. Sail around the world. Swim without holding my nose. See my daughter graduate. Abandon all insecurities. Be a teacher. Eat more of everything.”

Since then, over one thousand “Before I die” walls have been created in more than thirty-five languages and in more than seventy countries. Some of the responses make you want to meet the people who wrote them. Before I die I want to... Swim in a pool of golden retriever puppies. Do a cartwheel. Make it in hip hop. Straddle the international dateline. Proudly wear a bikini. Fall in love. Own a llama farm.

Some are heartbreaking. Before I die I want to... Hold her one more time. Find a cure for my daughter’s disease. Make my dad proud again.

Brett Younger says, “But most of us could do better. Being a great salsa dancer is a fine goal, but we should aim higher. Before I die I want to... Tell good stories. Work for justice. Give to feed starving children. Care for my family. Care for someone else’s family. Forgive the one person I was not planning to forgive. Love someone enough to weep with them when they weep. Become more like Christ. Help my church become more like Christ” (Brett Younger, *Funny When You Think About It*, 152).

Before I die I want to... Be a friend of Jesus?

No longer servant, but *friend*... Will you take the promotion?

Amen.