

Sermon for 5-6-18; John 15:9-17
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I have an announcement to make: I have decided, after much prayerful reflection, that I do not want to be "a Christian" anymore. Now please don't misunderstand me; I don't mean that I no longer believe Jesus of Nazareth to be the son of God, the Messiah, the Christ who showed us how to live and conquered death once and for all... I believe that with every fiber of my being. What I mean to say is that I don't want to be labeled as "a Christian." From now on, I want to be "a friend of Jesus."

A friend of Jesus -- not just a follower or a believer, but a friend. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples that they are his friends. This passage comes as part of Christ's long farewell discourse in the Gospel according to John. Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his upcoming death and they are understandably anxious. In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, which we heard last week, Jesus uses the metaphor of himself as the true vine and the disciples as branches with the potential to bear much fruit. So with today's verses, he's gone from a challenging, somewhat abstract metaphor to a much simpler concept -- friendship.

Friendship is easy, right? Everyone can understand it... well, I'm not sure about the context of the Holy Land two thousand years ago, but in America today, there are many people who do not know what it is to experience true friendship. Loneliness and isolation are on the rise, people are suspicious of those they don't know, technology encourages superficial connections, and the cult of busy-ness leaves little time for building relationships. There are many of us who cannot remember the last time we felt the comfortable, blessed companionship of a true friend.

I know the great blessing of a deep, abiding friendship. Natalie and I first met in sixth grade, and we might have seemed like an odd pair. She was beautiful, popular, funny, and charming, while I was nerdy and shy, with the dreaded combination of glasses and braces (I even had a headgear for a few years, but I didn't have to wear it to school, thanks be to God). In high school, Natalie was on the Homecoming Court and voted "Best Dressed" in our class; I was the editor of the school newspaper and very active in the French Club. Today, Natalie is a clinical psychologist with a practice in San Francisco, and I am an Episcopal priest here in Springfield (or, as I often describe myself to friends, a Professional Church Lady).

Although separated by geography, Nat and I have a deep, heartfelt, abiding connection that does not waver due to time or distance. We are **protective** of each other -- in fact, the one and only time I have ever struck another person with intent to harm was on the school bus, when a boy insulted her with racist language (I made him cry). We **forgive** each other, over and over again -- I have a very clear memory of eating my lunch alone in the parking lot at school one day (Nat and I were 'in a fight' about something or other) when she saw me, walked over and declared "This is dumb. Let's forget it," and immediately sat down. We **affirm** each other, and we **build each other up** -- it was Nat who spent hours curling and styling my (much longer) hair on my wedding day, and who told me how beautiful I looked. And we are always **present** and **there for each other** in rough times -- when I sent a mass text message to 30 different people after my guinea pig died, and my phone rang a few seconds later, I knew it would be her.

And I think perhaps the most defining characteristic of a deep and abiding friendship like ours is **complete comfort in vulnerability**. Who can you cry in front of, without worrying how you sound or look or what that person might think of you? Who can you whine and moan and complain in front of, and know that he or she won't judge you for

it? With whom can you let down your guard, and share your hopes and dreams and regrets without fear? Who will abide with you, with every part of you on display, the good, the bad, and the ugly?

An article published just last month in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* -- who knew? -- by Jeffrey Hall of the University of Kansas has been making the rounds in social mediaⁱ. Titled "How many hours does it take to make a friend?", the article presents Hall's research and analysis based on studies of Americans ages 18 and older who had relocated more than 50 miles away from their previous homes in the last six months. The study's purpose was to ascertain what kind of investment of time and energy is involved in making or building friendships, both casual and deep.

When I first saw this study referenced on Facebook, it was with a jaded tone: *Apparently it takes 140 hours to make a good friend... No wonder we're all so lonely!* But of course that's not the full story. Hall's article is quite fascinating, because it explores the amount of dedicated time required to develop a casual friendship, a good friendship, and that elusive best friendship; it explains different kinds of social interaction and their value in friendship-making; and it discusses some of the factors that inhibit our ability to make new friends.

A few takeaway points:

- it takes time to build relationships, and the more time spent, the more meaningful the relationship;
- superficial interactions, like small talk about the weather or workplace chit-chat, do not contribute to developing friendships; and
- the challenge (or perceived challenge) of time constraints is a major barrier to developing meaningful friendships.

I wonder what these results might tell us about our spiritual lives, and our church relationships?

If it takes 140 hours of dedicated time to build a good friendship with another person, how much time should we spend in prayer, Bible study, and worship to build a vibrant spiritual life? Relationships are a vital part of Christian spirituality -- we are called to be friends of our Lord and of one another, affirming and strengthening and supporting each other, abiding in God's love. Sunday morning worship is just over an hour each week, and if you stay for formation time, two hours. Two hours a week, two important hours -- but still, our souls require more spiritual nourishment, more time spent resting in the presence of the Holy.

And if we are to encourage and support one another in faith, just as Jesus asks his disciples to do in today's reading, the quality of our engagement matters. Jeffrey Hall's study shows that, while the frequency of superficial conversations can actually harm a developing friendship, conversations that demonstrate intentional investment in the other (like calling just to say hi, checking in or catching up) are integral in deepening the strength of a friendship. In communications and bonding theory, these are called "striving behaviors," and they are the best way to build meaningful relationships.

What are our spiritual "striving behaviors"? What can we do to demonstrate our desire to be closer to God? How can we follow Jesus more faithfully? And how can we show our brothers and sisters in the pews next to us that we are invested in their lives as well?

Faith is a team sport; a collective endeavor. Being a disciple of Christ, a friend of Jesus, is NOT just about "me and my God." Our Creator designed us for connection. Our Three-in-One God is living connection. Jesus didn't go about his ministry alone; although he certainly spent time in solitude and prayer, he called and commissioned his disciples to accompany him every step of the way. And the earliest Christian communities were defined by their emphasis on close relationships --

living as brothers and sisters in faith, with their possessions in common, each individual dedicated to the well-being of the others. Abiding in love is what those early Christians did best.

Jesus said, "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" (vs 12 & 14). He's told us exactly what we have to do -- we have to love. We have to love, not halfheartedly or occasionally or only when it benefits us, we have to love as he loves us, fully and fiercely and unselfishly.

Jesus calls us to abide in his love, and to love others the way he loves us, with a spirit of forgiveness and compassion and encouragement. He knows our sins and our fears and our weaknesses, all of it, and he loves us still. He loves us better than we love ourselves. Let us abide in his love, and let us strive to share that love with one another. It takes time and energy and attention to love well, but it will be worth it, when we hear him call us friends. Amen.

ⁱ Jeffrey A. Hall's article "How many hours does it take to make a friend?" can be found at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0265407518761225>