

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, September 3, 2023

Siblings in Christ, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer as we come into our time of scripture. Let us pray.

Loving and faithful God, you have promised to be with us anytime we gather together. You are the light into our path. Your voice opens up the dark places of our hearts, creating a space that we can hear and respond once again to you. Open us now once again that we may hear your words of comfort and peace, your words that call us to your journey and speak across the generations. Amen.

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 15, the 12th verse. Sorry. Why did I say the second—the 12th verse of the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. As we continue in this our final Sunday of Beginning Again and we reflect upon friendship. Let us hear these words from the early church.

John 15:12-17

Jesus said to the disciples ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you might love one another.

These are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

In our scripture text this morning, Jesus is talking to his disciples about what it takes to be in relationship in the kingdom of God. John 15 is dead in the center of what are called the Farewell Discourses in the fourth gospel. Chapters 14 through 17 of John's gospel have Jesus giving speeches to the gathered disciples, attempting to prepare them for what he knew was going to happen. This farewell discourse happens following the Last Supper but before they move into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, so this is Jesus in almost his very last words with his gathered disciples, his last chance to reflect with them on what they need to help them through what Jesus knows is coming. And he says to them, “I give you a new commandment to love one another as I have loved you.” It's important to hear this in the context of that phrase, to recognize that loving one another for Jesus means serving one another. Right before this conversation with the disciples, Jesus had a Passover meal with them; and in the Gospel of John we do not have him instituting the Last Supper. In the Gospel of John following Passover, Jesus takes off his robe and moves around the table washing the feet of the disciples, the Savior of the world humbling himself into the role of a servant to serve those gathered disciples. That is the first thing on their mind and on Jesus's mind when they hear him say “Love one another as I have loved you.” Very much contrary to the Hallmark version of love as a feeling, as those butterflies in your stomach, as the feeling of a first kiss or the affection you have for someone you care deeply about. Jesus is

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talking about love as an action, love that changes who we are, not just something that we feel when it feels right. This is Jesus's new commandment to his friends. He treats them as equals. He says himself in our text that he treats them not as servants and yet he also continues to serve them. In a very real sense Jesus is calling the disciples to the mutuality of relationship, to a partnership that equals respect and value on both sides. This mutual relationship, this mutual friendship that Jesus is calling them to is a choice, not a feeling but an action and a choice. Just a few chapters before this when talking about the Good Shepherd, Jesus says, "the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," and a couple of verses later Jesus goes on to say, "No one... I am the Good Shepherd. No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord." Jesus is saying to the disciples once again that the path he walks is the path he chose. God incarnate could have chosen a path of power and might, overturning the authorities of the world and riding in like a conquering hero; but our scriptures assure us that God chose the path of relationship and presence, not the path of the power of the world, but the path of God. In the same way Jesus is telling his disciples to choose the same path, to choose to be in mutual relationship with one another.

Now the kind of friendship that is modeled by Jesus is indeed a choice, but it's also hard for us, I think, sometimes to wrap our brains around. It's hard to recognize, and by hard sometimes I mean painful for us to recognize that friendships don't all survive in the same way. Sometimes a friendship has its moment and its place in our lives, and then we have moved on and grown, or they have moved on and grown, and that friendship is never the same again. Not all friendships stay the same over time. There is a natural ebb and flow, sometimes one that is painful for us, whether recently painful or long-term painful as we think about the friendships that we've had and the friendships that we may have lost. Now, even when they're healthy, friendships can be hard. I had the privilege this summer, James and I did, of welcoming very close friends from Kansas to come and visit us here in Memphis. Deep, deep friendships that we developed in the 10 years that we lived in Kansas. Friends that have seen us through so many ups and downs. We have seen through the death of parents, through the birth of children, through job changes, through relationship changes, the kind of deep and abiding friendships that adults want to have and dream of having in their lives, but friendships that cover the course of my youngest daughter Fiona's life. And it was great because they pulled up in the driveway and they all piled out of the car, and it was as if we...we just immediately fell back into rhythm. It was like we had never been apart. And there were wonderful weekends and one week-long visit that we had the chance to have, but it was also painful, because even though our relationships are still deep and meaningful and powerful, they're no longer the same, because we don't live daily together the way we lived daily together in Kansas. We have missed small things in each other's lives that over the course of a year when you see each other once or twice a year, those build into bigger things, and those relationships are important and deep, and they're very much the same as they were, but they are also very different, because time has passed, and we have changed, and our circumstances and our situations have changed. Even the best of friendships shift and change, and there is some grief in that as well as some joy.

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While we wrestle with Jesus's definition of friendship when he says, "I call you my friends and I call you to love one another," we also reflect on our own friendships, and we think about friendships that maybe aren't what we want. And I want us to be clear to hear that if a friendship is not mutual, if it is not rooted in the mutuality that Jesus is describing, if it is damaging, if it is destructive, Jesus is calling us to pull back. When Jesus says, "Love one another," he is not talking about a love that is coerced, a love that is forced, or even a love that might be self-serving. That's not the kind of love God is calling the disciples to, not the love we have experienced from our savior. Love is not self-immolation. We are not called to light ourselves on fire to keep other people warm.

In the same way love is not self-aggrandizement. We are not called to hold ourselves apart from and above others and take from relationships and not give back.

The gospels testify to the expansive nature of God's Beloved Community, that welcomes all people but does not condone all behavior. Jesus was the first person to call people out when their relationships, their friendships, their interactions with the world were broken. Jesus is the first one to berate those who were harassing a woman that they caught in sin. Jesus was the first to tell them to let those without sin cast the first stone. Jesus was always the one speaking to the people that we have pushed to the margins, the people that others are ignoring; and Jesus is also the very first one who, when the sons of Zebedee, James, and John are arguing over who is the greatest among them, which of us disciples is the most powerful or the most loved, Jesus turns around and says "Get Behind Me, Satan" because that kind of relationship is not the kind of relationship that Jesus is calling the world to. God calls us to center ourselves, not over others. We are called to know ourselves and to know others but to center God in all of these friendships. Now like most things in the gospel, this flies in the face of what we will culturally call friendship.

Friendship is not just about saying the niceties. According to Jesus, it's not about being nice that all costs. Being a good friend is not about contorting yourself to fit someone else's idea of a friend. Friendship is also not just expecting the friendship to benefit you and to not require anything of you.

Friendship goes beyond Southern nice. It goes beyond Midwest nice even. God is calling us into deep relationship with one another, being present with people, and honoring our own boundaries in the same way that Jesus called all those around them to honor his. When he needed a break, he said, "I'm going to go take a nap, and I'm going to go up on this mountain and pray;" and when he knew the people needed him, Jesus was present with the people.

Beginning again with friends, as we've been talking about beginning again all of August and then this first Sunday in September, if we're looking at friendships and a way to Begin Again through the eyes of the gospel, it requires us to take stock of ourselves and our own needs, as well as what God is calling us to be and to do in relationship. For some people beginning again with a friendship might look like pouring time and energy into a relationship that is struggling or a

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friendship that you've abandoned. It might mean offering a bit more of yourself in a time when a friend desperately needs it.

Beginning again with friends might also look like creating distance from a friendship or a situation that is not rooted in mutuality. If the wheel of time has turned and a particular friendship has run its course, that's okay. Jesus said to the disciples that sometimes the right action is to knock the dust off your feet and move on.

Some friendships that we have are not built around true relationship, and some friendships might not ever get there. I'm willing to bet that many of us could if...if I bought a microphone down in the center aisle and asked you, I'm willing to bet that many of us can recount a friendship that we still grieve, a friendship that was unequal, a friendship that harmed us or left us wanting more.

it is okay, friends, to let go, to stop clenching onto something that is gone.

But it's important for us to note that Jesus does not tell us to toss those relationships into outer darkness and to treat those people with any hatred or disrespect.

God says, "Love one another as I have loved you." I was fond of telling the youth group back in Kansas Jesus says to love your neighbor. Jesus didn't say anything about liking them.

Love is a choice we make to treat people, every person, as God's beloved even if they don't necessarily treat us the same way. Just as Joshua shared with the children, that can often be the hardest times to love one another in friendship, but it is what we are called to be and to do.

We shouldn't ever, ever fool ourselves into thinking that what God calls us to is easy, because being in relationship is difficult, and it's complicated, and it's messy. One need only to look at the witness of Jesus's life to see that, but when we model our approach to friendship, our approach to broader relationship on that of Jesus, when we love as we have been loved, when we value ourselves and we value others, we find a depth inside that changes us; and like most things of faith, it is truly about the journey that we take when we are open to the journey, when we can see and honor the light of God in other people and in ourselves. When we center that image of God, that's the light that changes us and changes the world, the light that the darkness shall never overcome.

The truth of the Gospel is also this. God isn't calling us into this type of relationship just with our friends, just with the people around us. When Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "This is my new commandment, love one another as I have loved you" to those gathered disciples, we get the chance to eavesdrop, to hear the vision that God has for all of creation. God is calling us into this kind of mutual relationship with the whole world, with all of God's children.

We love God and we love the world, friends.

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But the promise and the strength of the Gospel is just this. We are never on this journey alone, whether we are beginning again with our faith, beginning again with family or foes or friends, God is on this journey with us. God is constantly creating newness for us and newness for all of creation. As David said in his sermon a couple of weeks ago, “God is not creating a new thing for the old you.”

So when we reflect upon God's call to love one another as we have been loved, God's call to begin again, we have to wrestle with the question of what do we need to set down to step forward on that journey with God? What do we need to let go of, and what do we choose to pick up as we walk with God? I trust that the answer to that question is different for every single one of us, but it is the question and the call that Jesus puts before us this day. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Amen.