

“Friends Are Not Made, They’re Born”

Think for a moment about your many friends, the assumption there being that you have “many friends.” Consider them now, including those you no longer have occasion to see because they’ve moved away to another locale, or died, or you’ve simply lost contact. Consider how much alike they are . . . Consider how different they are . . .

Now, a lot depends in this exercise on how you define “friend.” One person may consider that anyone they have occasion to chat with even only on rare occasions is a friend. Others may think that only those people with whom one could share their inmost thoughts could be a friend. There are many people we might label acquaintances, still others as companions (maybe teammates), and yet others we may say we are friendly to or with.

But who did you think of as I invited you to begin this sermon to think about “friends”? Was it your neighbors? An old schoolmate? Your spouse? (I should have disqualified that from the beginning, but if that is one you considered as friend, consider your relationship blessed.) I suspect that many, if not most of you, had your thoughts go to those people with whom you share deep values, close affinity, and mutual respect.

Friends are important to us. If you are an introvert, like me, you possibly have only a handful of friends at any one time. If you are an extrovert, you likely have dozens, even scores, of people you would label friends. But they all have value.

Have you ever considered why a friend is your friend? Years ago, the columnist Sidney Harris wrote a piece about his friends in which he marveled at how little his friends had in common with each other. Yet there was something they shared in common with Sidney Harris, and thus they were friends.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells His disciples: ***"I have called you friends ..."*** *"Contemporary Christian piety tends to place words like 'sin,' 'redemption,' 'atonement,' 'justification,' 'repentance,' and 'born again' at the center of conversations about what it means to live out the offer of salvation made available through the life and death of Jesus Christ,"* observes Gail O'Day. *"'Friendship' does not figure prominently in such a theological world, since friendship is normally relegated to the secular realm, as exemplified by the prominence of friends as the pivot of plots in television shows and movies. Yet as...the Gospel of John shows, nothing could be farther from the truth. For Jesus, friendship is the ultimate relationship with God and one another."*

Yet there is a difficulty in understanding that ultimate relationship. On the one hand Jesus says, ***"You are my friends if you do what I command you."*** To my ears that sounds suspiciously conditional. Moreover, it is a condition we can never satisfy: ***"if you do what I command you."*** Why not just say, *"When you can make the earth reverse its rotation, then you can be my friend."* That, it seems to me, is Jesus' point . . . we cannot do what He commands. Therefore, on the other hand, Jesus says, ***"I have called you friends . . . You did not choose me but I chose you."*** It is never a matter of what we do to become Jesus' friends — we are His friends.

Friendship is a reciprocal relationship. Friends "do" for each other. It may not always be a balanced relationship. One friend may be more gifted, better educated, financially more secure than the other. This friend may be more ready to be open, share more about what is troubling in life, willing to unload some of the burdens carried. That one may be more reticent, more withdrawn, more internal. But in the end, there is a give-and-take in friendship that makes it the relationship it can be.

Of the friends you were considering as we began, how many of them do you never talk to? Could you really call such a person "friend"? In our friendship with Jesus, we also have this give-and-take.

Part of what we miss in the words of Jesus is the impact of the Greek

terms He employs. The Greek word for “friend” is φίλος (philos) which comes from the verb φιλέω (phileo) which means “love.” The Greeks had four words for “love;” this one was used exclusively for the friendship form. In our culture however, love is not the word by which we usually describe our relationships with friends. We tend to think of friendship in terms of pleasure (“He makes me happy; she brings me joy; I like being with him.”) or utilitarianism (“He is always there with a helping hand.”).

But Jesus and His contemporaries knew that friendship — at least the friendship Jesus wants to have — goes much deeper than that. When Jesus calls us friends, He tells us that He loves us. “*What a friend we have in Jesus,*” is one song many people label as a “favorite.” I know of no hymn that carries the words, “*What a friend I am to Jesus.*” We tend to make the relationship with Jesus one in which He loves us and we ...

“*Ay, there’s the rub,*” if I may steal from Shakespeare. “***By this we know that we love the children of God,***” John writes in today’s Second Lesson (and could have easily added “*and know that we love Jesus, the Son of God*”) “***when we love God and obey his commandments.***”

Curiously, John did not say that this is how we show that we love, but how we know that we love. God sees into our hearts; we have no need ever to try to prove anything to Him. And we certainly could not get anything past Him. So trying to show God (or would that be “show off”) our love is meaningless and fruitless.

But we often do not see into our own hearts, sometimes because we don’t care to look because we know what we will see; other times because we really are not in touch with our feelings.

So how do we know that we are friends of Jesus and children of God? By our love. But wait, a minute, Pastor, didn’t you just point out that we often cannot get in touch with our feelings? Glad you were paying attention. I did say that. So how can we know, how can we be sure that we love?

Simple answer: Love is not what you feel. Love is what you do. “***No one***

has greater love than this . . .” Jesus says . . . “*to feel really intense emotions about someone?*” “*to become all giddy with heart palpitations?*” “*to cry long and hard at the depth of feelings experienced?*” No!! “***to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.***” Love is doing, regardless of feelings.

To be sure, when we act in love, this itself can change how we feel. Ever been angry at a friend? So angry that you did not want to speak to her, to him? If that person is no longer your friend, I will guess that you never got past that anger and back to love. If your friendship remains, it is because one or both of you decided to do something — an apology was given, hands were shaken, hugs were shared.

If you ever find yourself in that position again, where you are angry at a friend because of some upheaval, the very first action you can take is to pray for that friend. It’s really hard to remain angry with someone for whom you are praying.

Sometimes the doing of love requires of us that we give up our pride. Oooh, that’s tough! But that’s what laying down your life entails — what you consider to be your vested interests; your point of view, so rationally and painstakingly thought through; your experience that qualifies you above all others — all of these can go if the friend needs them to be gone.

We often do loving things that cost us little — a few coins at Christmas, some clothing we no longer need, an appliance that we have replaced with a newer, fancier model (these are all fine things to do, but they really don’t ask that much of us). Love will sometimes demand that the cost be very high indeed — we may be asked to give up some things we deeply cherish.

So now I need to come to the title of today’s sermon. I have admitted on other occasions that what I thought I was going to preach on and what was the end product often changes after the newsletter has been published, in which case the title published may have little to do with the sermon proclaimed. But I do have a point to make with this title that,

believe it or not, does fit into this sermon (I just wasn't surer where). The title reads: *"Friends Are Not Made, They're Born"*

Many of you had the experience of being shipped off to someplace as a child, a place you did not know what to expect. I'm betting that, in those instances — when you went to summer camp, or the day you started school, or maybe with your first job — your mother tried to convince you what a great experience this would be by saying something like, *"You'll make lots of friends."*

How do you "make" a friend? Is there a kit with instructions? Is there a blueprint to follow? What are the building blocks necessary? You don't "make" friends. You become friends. You grow into friendship. If you try too hard to "make" a friend, I can just about guarantee that you will send that person running away.

Our friendship with Jesus comes first of all because Jesus calls us friends. Jesus initiates it; the Spirit confirms it and then nourishes it. That what happened in today's First Lesson in the city of Joppa. That is what happens each time we bring someone to this baptismal font. In Baptism, we know that we experience death and resurrection and rebirth. We are born into this friendship with Jesus.

So there's nothing we do to "make" Jesus our friend. He is our friend. Because He is, we now can do the loving things that we have seen in Him. We can love Him. We can do the work of loving others.

Amen.