

TEXT: John 15:9-17 As my God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Creator’s commandments and abide in God’s love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 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 Creator. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

How many of you relate to the term Adult Child? It is that peculiar time when your child becomes an adult – or when you as a child, leave home and take on your own responsibilities. It is a time when the relationship with the parent changes.

My first visceral understanding of this was when my daughter returned from two years away at school. As she settled back into our home, I found myself avoiding her. She was the one who finally called me on it. “Mom, what is up? Why don’t you talk to me? You seem always mad at me. Don’t you want me here?” Well, I was not mad at her – to the contrary, I was trying hard to give her “space,” to be sure that I wouldn’t intrude on her or be an overbearing or nagging mother. At the same time, I didn’t really trust her to make good decisions. I ended up not saying anything to her. I think I was actually afraid of her!

It was the beginning of our journey to figure out who we were together as adults. I was still her mother. I still had a particular wisdom and a particular concern for her, even a particular authority. She was still in my home. But Megan had grown up, and was more of an equal now. We had to negotiate what that meant.

Today, here is Jesus, asking the same thing of us. Last week we were his sheep, members of a flock; our lives depended on trusting implicitly in the Good Shepherd who cared only for our highest good. This week, Jesus calls us friends; Jesus asks us, rather than requires us, to do what he commands. We are given more choice, more responsibility.

This is my commandment. Love each other.

Unlike the other New Testament writers, John does not use the word commandment to refer to the ordinances of the Old Testament. He is never concerned about the law as a burdensome load from which Jesus brings freedom. Instead, in the Book of John, commandment always refers either to the directives Jesus gives to his disciples or to the directives Jesus receives from his Creator, by which his whole earthly career is guided: Love one another. Stay connected to one another. Serve one another. Be friends.

Jesus is still the Shepherd, still our Rabbi, our Parent, our Savior, but the relationship is evolving. Jesus came to earth as our Good Shepherd. As he prepares to leave this human life, he asks us to be his friends. No longer simply sheep, no longer servants or slaves who do the master's bidding without explanation, without understanding. Jesus thinks we have grown up and can now become friends – to him, and to one another.

I have often reminded you that the worst insult Jesus can conjure is to call people hypocrites. By the same token, the highest title he can give people is to call them friends – brothers and sisters. Unlike acquaintanceship, friendship is based on love. It is a relationship freely entered into, freely given, freely exercised. Friends minister to each other, nurse each other. Give to each other, worry about each other, stand ready to help each other. Friends never cheat each other, or take advantage, or lie. Friends glory in each other's successes and are downcast by the failures. Friendship involves sacrifice.

A poet named Peggy Shriver was riding the subway in New York City when, right before her eyes, she witnessed a friend of Christ. She describes what happened in a poem called "The Spirit of Thirty-fourth Street":

"Doors opened with a silent scream, like photographs of anguish; the subway paused, shed cargo and raged on. She lurched aboard, sagged into a vacant seat, frail weight of her gray years hunched with cold. Numb fingers plucked at rags, drawn close against raw misery. Knuckles, cracked and swollen white, clutched into a plea for warmth. He, dark and lithe swung down the aisle, taut jeans dancing rhythmically. With Latin grace he, sidling past her patient form, in one smooth gesture disappeared through subway doors, leaving in her lap, like folded dove wings, his black leather gloves."

The Talmud says, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Rachel Naomi Remen tells about a congregation and pastor in west Philadelphia who went to a local supermarket, to buy food to supply the food pantry. In addition to their purchases for their food pantry, they randomly selected several shoppers for whom they paid the bill. One woman was at the market to buy food for the funeral luncheon following her mother's service. Another was a woman out of work. Both were amazed and astonished at this gift. The pastor said something to the effect that they were just doing what the gospel called them to do -- reach out to others in love.

Dorothy Day wrote, "What we would like to do is change the world—to make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended for them to do. And we can change the world: we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world."

I heard a colleague of mine describe his mother as being love personified. As a boy, one afternoon he found her sitting at the table with an old homeless man. Apparently she had gone shopping, met the man along the way, and invited him home for a warm meal. During the conversation the man said, "I wish there were more people like you in the world." Where upon his mother replied, "Oh, there are. But you must look for them." The old man simply shook his head, saying, "But, lady, I didn't need to look for you. You looked for me."

Jimmy Carter wrote: "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something . . . I'm free to choose what that something is, and the something I've chosen is my faith. Now, my faith goes beyond theology and religion and requires considerable work and effort. My faith demands -- this is not optional -- my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference."

JoAnn Jones was in her second month of nursing school. Her professor gave a pop quiz. JoAnn was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions -- until she read the last one: "What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?" Well, she knew to whom the question referred. She had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50s. But she had to hand in her paper leaving that last question blank. When one student asked if the last question would count toward the quiz grade, the professor replied, "Absolutely. In your careers you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you can do is smile and say hello." It was an example JoAnn never forgot. And she learned the cleaning woman's name: Dorothy.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, other-centered men can build up."

Most of us are willing participants in the "me" culture of today. After all, somewhere deep inside we're wired for self-preservation. History tells us that it's nothing really new, but it seems that we've become experts at it. Most businesses strive to customize products to meet our individual needs and demands, personal blogs are the ultimate truth, we feel entitled to rewards for everyday behavior and work, ads lift us up as the most important person in the world, and success = being better than the person next to you. "It's all about me." Jesus says otherwise.

Love one another. I appoint you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Being friends, I am discovering, is a lot like forgiveness. You do it. You do it because Jesus calls us to do it, because Jesus demonstrates how to do it. You do it without expectation, without reciprocation. You do it because there is freedom in the very commitment. You do it because you are part of the flock of the Shepherd and because that Shepherd calls you friend. You offer your forgiveness, your respect, your compassion, and your service, even to the least of these, and you offer it to Jesus Christ, you offer it to our God.

Jesus was a lot better than I was at trusting us to be friends, to be adult children. But I think I have evolved with my kids to a place of friendship. Oh I am still the Mom, I still have certain privileges and expectations and I still hold a wider perspective and wisdom. But we respect one another, we honor one another, we like one another. We are willing to lay down our lives for one another.

For this I am grateful. But to be a friend of Jesus, I must be a friend to all, not just to my family -- a friend to the world, every day, in every way. May it be so for me, and for you. Amen.