

## **“Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy – Part Two”**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; John 15:9-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to your sacrificial love and know true friendship in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Today's sermon is the second in our series, “Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy.” Last week, we introduced the series and explored a category that didn't make the title, family. In doing so, we gave away the ending, as we discovered that all these categories we like to put people in are fairly arbitrary, since God calls us to love everyone as best we can, regardless of how they're related to us. Nevertheless, we do put people into these categories, and the Bible addresses each of them fairly extensively, so it's worthwhile to explore them in turn, to see what we can learn about love from each dynamic. So today we're looking at friendship.

The Book of Ecclesiastes rivals the Book of Proverbs for pithy, practical advice. In the few verses we heard from chapter four, there are at least 3 good reasons for having friends suggested. A friend can help you up if you fall down. A friend can help keep you warm if you're sleeping without heat at night. And a friend can be invaluable if someone else picks a fight with you. Now probably all of us can connect with the first scenario, because everyone has fallen down at some point. But most of us don't sleep outside where we would need someone else's body heat to keep us warm. And most of us try to avoid physical altercations that would require

back-up. So while The Teacher's advice is practical and fairly convincing, in the abstract, as to why friends are useful, it's not necessarily all that relatable.

To be honest, the stuff Jesus says about friendship in John 15 isn't all that relatable either. If someone you'd known just a couple of years said, "you are my friend if you do what I command you," you'd probably back away as quickly as possible! So obviously, we need to read all this keeping in mind that connecting with Jesus is different than the way we connect with other friends. But I think it is fair to say that friendship is the highest ideal of relationship in the New Testament, and some of that is based on this passage. Jesus never married, that we know of, and Paul wasn't a big fan of matrimony either. Friendship is where it's at, as various Christian traditions over the centuries have tried to show.

Much of this comes down to verse 13, where we read, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Knowing this is Jesus talking to his disciples, we immediately think of the crucifixion and assume Jesus was just talking about himself. We might consider that it spoke to the circumstances of some early Christian martyrs, if we pushed ourselves to consider the historical context a little more. And certainly, we've seen plenty of movies with "Christ-figure" plots where dramatic things happen that demand one person die for the sake of the others. But that kind of drama doesn't usually emerge in our lives, which is just fine with us, because, as a general rule, we prefer the kinds of love that don't require that much sacrifice.

But I've got to tell you, this verse has taken on new meaning for me, the longer this pandemic has stretched on. It turns out there are lots of ways to "lay down one's life," even if we've just set it aside temporarily. So much of what used to shape our lives is gone right now: movies, lunches with friends, concerts, theater, not to mention normal school and normal shopping and normal church. Even just the freedom to walk around in public without worrying about whether we've got our mask and whether we're wearing it properly or whether we accidentally left it in the car. Oh, the things we used to take for granted!

The isolation this pandemic has forced upon us weighs differently on different people. Some of us have more comfort with solitude than others, and some are simply wired to require more social interaction. We all have to find our own coping mechanisms and sources of succor. But what if we could consider the onerous demands of the pandemic as a spiritual practice? What if this is an opportunity to try laying down our lives out of love for our friends? Some may argue that a sacrifice that is forced upon us is not a true sacrifice, but we can choose to exercise our own agency and reframe the current restrictions on our lives as part of our faith, a way of following Jesus. Nine months in may feel a little late for an attitude adjustment. On the other hand, this may be exactly the moment when we need one.

But how? How do we do it? This is hard. The whole point of sacrifice is that it's difficult and unpleasant and possibly even painful. It may feel impossible to talk ourselves into keeping on keeping on with all the many limitations that have been

imposed on our lives. We may insist that the point of this passage from John 15 is that Jesus made the sacrifices so we wouldn't have to. But no, that's not what he said. He said, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." There's that "command" word again. And yet, he also said, "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends." The intimacy evoked by those words helps us remember that the commandment Jesus gave us is nothing more and nothing less than love. God's love, Christ's love, and yes, the love we share with one another as friends.

Jesus tells us in this same passage how to live into that sacrificial love, so that we can joyfully choose to lay down our lives, if only temporarily, for our friends. "Abide in my love," he says. He was able to do what he did because he was abiding in God's love. And we can abide in that love too and find ourselves empowered to love our friends sacrificially, in ways we may have never imagined.

I said earlier that Ecclesiastes was full of practical advice. It seems to me that the verses we read also contained a hint at a spiritual truth. The Teacher has been talking about how "two are better than one," but then in verse 12, we read "a threefold cord is not quickly broken." Now maybe we've suddenly added a third friend to the mix here, but I think something else is going on. The threefold cord is the relationship that is grounded in the love of God. The kind of relationship in which you would make sacrifices for one another's well-being, and so that larger Love that is God becomes like a third presence in your friendship. The threefold cord is

both the kind of friendship we are called to as Christians and the thing that makes it possible to offer such sacrificial love for our friends.

There is so much that we miss right now, not the least of which are the basic activities and experiences we normally recognize as friendship. We are all making sacrifices that we did not expect or choose. We may have way more alone time to contemplate what it means to abide in Christ's love than we ever wanted. But if we can aim to be part of that threefold cord, to invite the sacrificial love of God as a third presence in our friendships, I believe we will discover that the sacrifices aren't as hard, and the connections are just as strong. This is how we will get through this trial, together despite our separation, so that we can bear "fruit that will last" as Jesus asks of us. Let us abide in Christ's love, giving thanks that he has called us friends.

Hallelujah and Amen.