

“A New Commandment”

John 15:9-17; Acts 10:44-48 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be filled with your love
and live in Christian friendship with all. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

When you hear the word “love,” what are the first things that come to your mind? I think for most of us, the immediate assumption is that we’re talking about romantic love – the kind of exclusive, passionate, long-term relationship we’re told is the ultimate fulfillment of human destiny. With today being Mother’s Day, if I bring up love, your thoughts might jump to the love of a mother, yours or the mythical World’s Best Mom commemorated on t-shirts and mugs. Since we’re in church, it’s possible that when we mention love, you’d guess we’re about to talk about God’s love.

So it struck me, as I was reading that passage from John, that when Jesus is talking about love here, he’s talking about friendship. Not romance, not familial bonds, but friendship – a free-form, entirely voluntary, open-to-anyone sort of relationship. That is the connection that Jesus implies is the best reflection for us of what God’s love is like. “No greater love,” he says. That’s a serious claim. It was as counter-cultural then as it is now. Jesus proposes that friendship is at the heart of Christianity. Anyone who’s tried to maintain a friendship for more than a few years can recognize what a tenuous basis for a world religion that is.

For a culture that is supposedly shaped by Christianity, American society is not particularly well-structured to support friendship. Sure, our popular culture portrays friendships, with buddy movies and sitcoms about groups of friends. But think about how many more of the shows we watch are based on work-places. In actuality, our economy gives precious few of us the time needed to nurture relationships with those beyond our own households. The pandemic, of course, made this even harder, as it became risky to spend time with any more people than we absolutely had to.

In this regard, churches have maintained a counter-cultural devotion to friendship, though we also have been mesmerized by the allure of the nuclear family. By encouraging commitment to small groups and other forms of connection, churches have made spaces for friendship most of us would otherwise struggle to find. Despite the ways in which the larger culture tries to narrow the scope of our relationships, the church has managed to hold onto some portion of this “new commandment” Jesus gave us.

And it is a continually new commandment. Given the way we come into the world, seeking out connection beyond our families is always going to require extra effort. Unlike our relationships with our families, which are bound by a strong cultural sense of obligation and an almost inescapable feeling of connection, friendship is entirely shaped by our own choices. Friendship is voluntary; the rules are not clear. There is no formal contract stating that two people are friends and clarifying what sort of obligations are therefore involved. When we dig down into it,

perhaps we can see why Jesus saw this as the best reflection of God's love: it's because love is the only thing that holds a true friendship together. Sure, there are friendships of convenience – work friends, school friends, those with whom you have to spend the most time who are the most compatible or just the least annoying – but true friendship emerges when we have to choose to spend time together and actually make the effort required to do so. That only happens because of love.

In case this revelation Jesus shared about friendship being the purest form of love doesn't seem shocking enough, the verses we read from Acts add on another layer of astonishment. It was a very short set of verses that come at the end of one of the best and most ignored stories in the Bible, the story of Peter and Cornelius. I love this story. I've wanted, for some time, to invent a new church holy day based on this story. I call it "The Festival of the Clean Sheets". It involves people from lots of different cultures getting together and sharing their various different foods, on picnic blankets spread out on the ground. Probably there would also be a collection of bed linens for families in need. Doesn't that sound awesome?

In the actual story, Peter, the apostle, is prepared to welcome a household of Gentiles into the Christian fold by having a vision of a sheet lowered down from heaven, covered with all sorts of food that a devout Jew was not supposed to eat. During the vision, he hears a voice from heaven telling him to eat it. When he protests, the voice says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." As the vision is fading, Peter is summoned to the next town to visit Cornelius, who has

also had a vision. When Peter and his Jewish Christian companions arrive, there is a comparing of visions, and eventually Peter proclaims, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” And then the Holy Spirit pours forth, as we heard, proving without doubt that these Gentiles are appropriate candidates for baptism.

Here's the part from the passage we read that I want to lift up again. “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded,” it says. Jesus has told us that friendship is the highest ideal of Christian love. Okay, that’s a stretch, but we do like our friends, so it’s not that shocking. But think for a moment: is there someone you would be astounded to discover you’re friends with? Each of us is trapped in a different cage of biases and assumptions, so I can’t guess which friendship candidates would astound you the most. But I’m pretty sure we all have some. And I’m pretty sure the Bible is telling us that yes, those folks are also who Jesus is talking about when he’s telling us to lay down our lives for our friends.

In John, Jesus asks us to love one another as he has loved us. This goes way beyond “love your neighbor as yourself.” Scripture makes very clear that God does not love us because we’re good or worthy, but just because we are, in all the ways we are. To love one another as Jesus has loved us, means offering friendship to people not because they’re good or cool or have a nice pool, but because they need a friend, and so do we. Can you think of your most unlikely friend? Have you stayed in touch over the long months of this pandemic? Is Jesus calling you to reach out again and

re-connect? Or is there an astonishing new friendship you're being invited to pursue? Someone you assumed you'd have nothing in common with? Where did we get this idea that it's best to be friends with people just like us? That's not what the Bible teaches us. There's a line from a song I love that starts out where we often get stuck, but then goes deeper and turns outward as Jesus is inviting us to: "I want to be with my family, people who understand me, and I find them almost every place I go."

This truth that friendship is at the core of our faith is one of the reasons the pandemic has been so hard on our church life. But I have seen you making the effort to keep that love alive. I have seen you reaching out to one another and trying to stay in touch with those on the edges, despite the limited emotional resources we're all operating with at this point. And I've seen you opening your hearts to draw the circle wider, even when circumstances are making it so difficult. Christ is alive in our midst. And praise God for that, because this world needs the friendship of Christ! There are so many who have been overwhelmed by isolation and loneliness and feelings of unworthiness and being forgotten. Can you imagine trying to get through this pandemic without a church community to support you? So many people have been living that struggle. And Jesus wants us to make friends with them. "Go and bear fruit," he says. "Abide in my love." Let us give thanks for the friendship we share in Christ and continue to seek out astonishing new friends! Hallelujah and Amen!