

Sixth Sunday of Easter, B
Acts 10:44-48
I John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

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First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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My family moved a lot when I was growing up, and I never got used to it. It was always hard to find my place, and I never had a lot of confidence going into a new school. But what a difference it made to find that first friend! I remember when we moved to the Philadelphia area, one of my first days at Ardmore Junior High School, a girl named Mary reached out to me. Mary Gericke. She had a face full of freckles, long red-brown hair, a friendly smile and enough ease and confidence to share with everyone, it seemed. Mary took me under her wing, sat with me at lunch, and made me feel at home. She didn't have to do it. It's just the way she was. Warm and welcoming. We didn't go on to become really close friends – but Mary was my friend when I really needed it. That's something I'll never forget.

“Friend” is a beautiful word. It reminds us of the best things in life. As someone once said, “Your friend is the one who knows all about you, and still likes you!”

Friendship is freedom and trust and joy.

Still, there are friends and there are friends. We use the same word to describe a whole range of relationships from casual to close. A friend can be a passing acquaintance or someone you've played golf with for ten years. A friend can be someone you've had dinner with a couple times or someone you've known all your life. On Facebook, a friend can even be someone you've never met – they could be a computerized bot for all you know!

In our gospel reading for today, the word *friend* is used to describe our relationship to Jesus Christ. Jesus says, “You are my friends” and “I have called you friends.” I think that's remarkable, and rather puzzling for me at the same time.

I'm often uncomfortable when I hear people refer to Jesus as their friend. It can seem too casual or familiar, presumptuous. Is “my friend Jesus” the same as “my old pal Joey, who'd do anything in the world for me?” I'm afraid it is for some people, the same ones who are certain they know God's will for themselves and everyone else. But Jesus is not a buddy or a pal. Jesus is our Saving Lord. The Incarnate God. So, in what sense can we call Christ our friend, and what does it mean to be friends of Jesus?

In our gospel reading the word “friends” means literally, “those who are loved.” And the word for love is *agape* – self-giving love, mutual, enduring love. So when Jesus says, “I have called you my friends,” he means, “you are the ones I love in a lasting way.” That’s so much more than buddies or pals. Jesus goes on to say,

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.

It says something about our status with God. A servant doesn’t know the master’s business. It’s a lopsided relationship with all the power and knowledge on one side and plenty of potential for abuse. But friends know each other in a more equal way. Friends share ideas and feelings. Friends know what makes each other tick.

And we do know what makes God tick, because Jesus reveals it. We know God loves humanity with a steadfast, everlasting love. We know God grieves all the suffering and injustice that tears apart creation and destroys lives. We know God is always at work to make all things new, to transform this whole world by the Spirit’s action. We know we are invited to be part of God’s transforming and just and compassionate work to heal and restore all people and things.

We are friends of God because we know God’s heart, and God knows our hearts too. That’s the deepest kind of friendship. And it’s the essence of our faith – knowing God and being known. This friendship is a place of great privilege. A place of trust and strength, a place where we can live out our lives in confidence.

But we know that friendships don’t just happen. Somebody has to make the first move. When you set out to make a new friend, at first you have to go out of your way, take a few risks. If you want to befriend a new neighbor, you have to make it your practice to speak to them when you see them, share a little of yourself over the recycling bins. You have get out there in the yard and start the conversation, maybe suggest a socially distanced happy hour as the weather gets warmer. The friendship might grow from there, but someone has to reach out and do the befriending.

We’ve all had times when we’ve felt isolated and lonely—especially this year in pandemic. We know *lonely*, we surely do. We’ve all had times when we wished someone would reach out to us. And Jesus is the one who does just that. Jesus is the one who *befriends* us. He says, “You did not choose me but *I chose you.*” That’s amazing, it’s wonderful! God in Christ *chooses* us, *befriends* us. Reaches right past all our insecurities with God’s outgoing, self-giving love. Just when we were feeling

invisible. Just when we felt completely unnoticed and unloved, God in Christ initiates a friendship that is like no other.

When you stop to think about it, that's exactly what Christ did throughout his ministry on earth. Befriended people. The blind man sitting by the road, the ten lepers rejected by everyone else, the woman condemned for adultery, the tax collector Matthew in his booth... First Christ befriended them, and then he changed their lives. Befriending the outcasts was so much a part of him that people said with disgust, "That man is a friend of sinners!" They meant it as a slur, but for us it is *pure grace*. We are graced to be among the all too fallible humans that God calls beloved.

Our friendship with Christ goes far beyond any human friendship we will ever know. Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Christ has literally laid down his life for us, a sacrifice that simply explodes any ordinary understanding of loyalty or love. Christ is our friend, and so much more.

And there's even more good news. Because through us, Christ intends to *befriend the whole world*. We have this privilege, this calling, to share Christ's friendship with everyone who needs the brand of love that only God can give.

And I wonder, what will it look like for Christ's friends to *befriend the world*? How will it be for us to see all the people of this earth as friends who mean something to us, friends in whom we take a genuine interest, people we want nothing but the best for?

Our reading from First John says nobody can love God abstractly. Loving God means loving God's children. Friendship with God means friendship with God's children. It doesn't depend on being fond of one another, or sharing mutual interests or common experiences. We befriend others for the simple reason that God loves them, just the same way God loves us.

Friendship with God means friendship with God's children. Try that on when you are driving down the freeway and someone cuts in front of you. Before you curse, think: "Child of God. My friend in Christ." Try it when you're irritated by yet another pile of garbage cascading across a sidewalk, or another cluster of tents clinging to the side of a hill. Before distancing yourself, think: "Children of God. My friends through Christ." Try it when you hear the news of yet another senseless and tragic shooting. Think of the victims, think of the shooter, think of their families: "Children of God, my friends through Christ."

We prefer to choose our friends, but this is not an option for people who are chosen first by Christ. Like Christ's love, our love bursts through barriers to defy the world's ways of loving. Christ's love is out to *befriend the whole world*.

And what does that look like... Maybe like an email alert I got this week from Lutheran Disaster Response. This organization of our church is sending donations around the globe to assist the Padhar Hospital run by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Madhya Pradesh, India. They are – we all are -- helping this hospital purchase an oxygen generator for its COVID-19 ward, addressing the exact needs our hearts have been so moved by in the international news. And Lutheran Disaster Response is supporting companion churches throughout India, on the ground efforts providing local, lasting help in this COVID crisis and more. It's one way of befriending the world in Christ's name. <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Relief-and-Development/Lutheran-Disaster-Response/Our-Impact/AsiaPacific-Disaster-Response>

Or it could be our churchwide support of racial justice work, seeking a way to make reparations for those who have been harmed. Or mental health advocacy promoted by Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. Or addiction counseling and networking through the Center of Addiction and Faith, a new coalition of Lutherans and others uniting for mutual support and healing. And much more.

We never accomplish this alone, but together. It is all an extension of Christ's love, freely given. Befriended by Christ, we are blessed to reach out as friends. Thanks be to God. Amen.