

May 6, 2018: Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B)
John 15:9-17: Love One Another

According to Facebook, I have 318 friends. I know, that number is embarrassing. Some of you have far more than 318 friends. I think I would have more friends if I sent out more friend requests, but I rarely ever do, because I don't do well with rejection. I know that is a possibility because I don't confirm every friend request I receive. (I know what you are thinking. Beggars can't be choosers). I have at least 30 that are waiting for a response. Either I don't have a clue who they are, or I do know who they are and I'm just not sure I want them creeping on my page, or it's a repeat request, which makes me wonder if it's a hacker. If any of you ever send me a friend request and I don't respond it isn't intentional.

That number 318 is also more than a little misleading, because I have far less friends than that in real life. I think you know what I mean by that. There is a difference between a Facebook friend and a real friend. And I suspect that difference varies from person to person, depending on your personality and how you define the word "friend."

I was wondering this week how many Facebook friends Jesus would have, if he had a Facebook page. I did a search and discovered he does have a page, actually several pages. His most popular page had over 1.5 million followers. Of course I know he did not actually set any of those up. Especially not the one that describes itself as "The Official Facebook page of Jesus Christ, AKA: JC, J.Christ, Jeezy Creezy and Big Sexy," which, unfortunately, has 2.2k followers.

But if Jesus did have a Facebook page, how many friends would he have? I think we could safely assume, based on the Scriptures, that he would send out a friend request to every single person with an account. (There are currently 2.2 billion active users.) And I imagine most people would want to confirm his request. But would Jesus consider them all his friends? Would Jesus differentiate between a Facebook friend and a real friend? How does he define the word "friend?"

According to the passage we read this morning, Jesus defines his friends as those who do what he commands. And his commandment is that we love one another as he has loved us. Looking around the world, in our country, in our community, and even sometimes in the church, at the way people treat one another, I think we would question how many of Jesus' friends are truly his friends, or at least acting like them.

This passage continues the conversation we began last week, where we were introduced to the metaphor of a vine and branches, where Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. But as I mentioned, we are branches with agency, meaning we have a choice to make, and that choice must be to abide in Jesus. And we must abide in Jesus if we are to bear fruit, which is a necessary part of experiencing the fullness of God's salvation. There are several references to bearing fruit in the Bible, and what exactly it entails, but here the emphasis is on love for one another.

One thing we notice at the start is Jesus tweaks the metaphor of the vine and branches to make his love that which we must abide in, if we are bear the fruit of love for one another. But this raises the question, how do we abide in his love? That answer is we abide in his love by keeping his commandments, which he defines singularly as loving one another as he has loved us. So in order to love one another we must abide in God's love. In order to abide in God's love, we must love one another. Is anybody else confused?

In the last six months or so I have added another step to my sermon preparation process. A friend donated a large white-board, which I installed in my office. To help me better organize my thoughts and understand whatever passage I'm working on I will write it out on the board. Not word for word. I will try to visualize it. I might draw pictures, or bubbles with key words, or other strange diagrams. I did that with this week's passage. Then I sat down and stared, and stared, and stared some more. And the more I stared, the more confused I became.

That is partly because the logic here involving this command to love, sounds so circular. It reminded me of the question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Here the question is, "Which comes first? My love or God's love?" Jesus must have anticipated that question. He answered it before it was asked when he told his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Jesus sent the friend request to us. It was not the other way around. It's because of his love for us that we are able to love others. I'm reminded of these words in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us."

Our salvation begins and ends with God's gracious invitation to enter into a relationship with him, a true friendship with him. But like any true friendship, it is reciprocal in nature, meaning, it is not a one-sided relationship. But it doesn't quite work the same way as a relationship between human beings. As God's love is poured into our lives, it should then overflow into the lives of others. We love God when we love other people. If we don't love other people, then we don't love God. That's just the way it works.

If God's love is not flowing out of our lives into the lives of others, that means something isn't working. And the problem isn't with God. The problem is with us. We have a hole somewhere, a leak, a blockage. And we don't allow God's love to flow through us, it will not be poured into us. Just as last week, where Jesus talked about the branch that doesn't bear fruit being removed from the vine, this is not a threat. It's simply a true statement. If we want to experience the fullness of God's love, we must abide in that love. The fruit of that abiding is love for others. If we are not loving others, then we are not abiding. We are missing out on all that God has for us.

Another image that came to my mind as I read through this passage was that of a circle. When the earliest theologians of the church were trying to come up with ways to envision the Trinity, they imagined the three persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, holding hands and forming a circle, almost swirling, as they moved around in a divine dance. The term they used to describe this was *perichoresis*, which is Greek for "rotation." The thing that held it all together, the gravitational force, if you will, at the center, was love. This is entirely consistent with the Biblical idea that God is love.

What I hear Jesus saying to his disciples, and to us, especially when he says the part about how he no longer calls them servants, but now calls them friends, and has given them this insider knowledge of what God is up to, is that he has invited us all into his inner circle. Through Jesus, God has invited us into the very heart and mind of God. And God is love. In God there is no darkness, no hatred, no anger, no envy, no selfishness, no bitterness. If we are to abide in God's love those things have no place in our hearts. In their place, there must be love, and love alone.

What does this love look like?

The Apostle Paul described God's love beautifully in his letter to the Christians in Corinth:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Jesus says simply this:

No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Here he explains to us that love is about sacrifice. It is about putting others before ourselves, even our very lives if necessary.

Which of course is exactly what Jesus would go on to do, for me, and for you. For everyone who has ever lived. He has invited us all into a relationship with him. He has called us his friends. Are you his true friend? Then you must love one another.

I know what some of you are thinking. But some people are hard to love. Yes, but what is the alternative?

Some of you have been carrying around too much in your heart that is not love. You have been carrying around the things I mentioned; the hatred, the anger, the envy, the selfishness, the bitterness. You have been carrying these things around too long. Like a giant millstone hung around your neck they are weighing you down, pulling you down to the ground.

You don't have to carry that weight any longer. When Jesus hung upon the cross he took it all upon himself. In the words of the Apostle Peter, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." If you refuse the gift of God, you are cheating yourself. And you are denying Jesus the reward of his suffering. You are depriving yourself of joy. Jesus came so that we would have joy, and so that our joy would be complete.

Still, you say again. Some people are hard to love. I have tried so hard to love this person, but I can't. I can't get past what they did, or didn't do, or said, or didn't say. You are right, you can't, but God can. Jesus was saying all this about love just after Judas had gone out to betray him, and just before Peter would deny him. Still he would lay down his life for him. This love does not come from us. It comes from God. We need only to get out of the way. We only need to abide in God, and let God's love flow through us, so that there is no longer any room for anything that is not love?

Do you want to be filled with so much of God's love this morning, that everything that is not love begins to float away?

Do you want to let go of the hate, anger, and bitterness inside you, and experiencing the joy that God has for you?

Then abide in God's love. Receive his love for you. Love that looked beyond all your faults, failures, inadequacies and imperfections. Love that looked beyond your sin. Love that laid down his life for you.