

Sermon—“Being Friends”

5/9/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever had one of those moments where you are teaching someone how to do something and they just can't seem to get it right, so you finally just decide to do it yourself? A few days ago, I pulled down three puzzles for my youngest son, Tyler. Given his age—he turns two next month—the puzzles can't be taken apart. Rather, they have pieces that look like different shapes, animals, and vehicles, pieces made of wood which are attached to pegs, so that each piece to be easily removed from and replaced on the board. The puzzles even have corresponding pictures of where each piece goes so that completing it might be that much easier. Now, Tyler can put most of the pieces where they go without much trouble. All he needs is a little help knowing how to rotate them and which direction to move them. There are some pieces, though, like one of an airplane, that he constantly struggles to replace, even after my suggestions, leading me, in the end, to sometimes lend him a helping hand and just do it myself.

Have you ever wondered while reading Scripture if Jesus ever felt the same? I mean, after all the times he watched the disciples struggling to understand him and follow his example, do you think he was ever tempted to say his goodbyes and just do it himself? For some Christians, the whole point of Jesus' coming was so that he could die and rise again on the third day. It's hard to see why he would have needed the disciples to do that. And yet, the disciples were and remained extremely important to Jesus, both before and after his death and resurrection. Our Gospel lesson for today helps us understand why.

After sharing the Last Supper with his disciples, the Gospel of John tells us, Jesus gave them a farewell discourse. Before his death he wanted to make sure that they understood who he

was, why he had been sent, and what would happen in the days that lay ahead. Today's Gospel lesson sits in the midst of that discourse and in it we hear him give two reasons why the disciples were so important. The first being joy. "I have said these things to you," we hear Jesus tell the disciples, "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Jesus called the disciples into his company because he wanted for them to share in his joy. Joy in God's creation, joy in their redemption, and joy in salvation being offered to everyone, everywhere, including them. Jesus saw what God was doing in and for the world and it brought him joy, joy which he longed to share with those around him. The second reason why the disciples were so important to him was their fruit. "I appointed you to go and bear fruit," we hear Jesus go on to say, "fruit that will last. Fruit like love and kindness, faithfulness and forgiveness. Fruit that will live on with you for eternity." Two important reasons that he ultimately summed up in one word, that word being: friendship.

Being friends with Jesus means that we must abide with him. The disciples did so while traveling with Jesus from one place to another, as they watched him preach and perform miracles, and in all the other untold moments that they spent together. In its simplest sense, our friends are the ones with whom we spend our time. They are the ones who attend the same church as us, who live next door and across the way, and who participate in and enjoy the same activities and groups. No, we don't know all our friends well, but in moments of crisis friendship can mean a great deal. Just think of a moment when you were sick or had an accident and a friend showed up to offer you help, or when you received a letter from someone out of the blue asking how you were doing. In order to be friends with Jesus we need to spend time with him, we must let our friendship abide.

Being friends with Jesus also requires that we place our trust in him. “You are my friends,” Jesus said to the disciples, “if you do what I command you.” Jesus uses the word “command” or “commandment” five times in today’s Gospel lesson, and he did so because he knew that real trust can only emerge in a community with shared expectations. We expect more of a friend than we do of a stranger. That’s why it hurts so much when a friend breaks our trust and why there is such profound sadness when we say or hear the words, “But I thought you were my friend.” God gave the Israelites the Laws of Moses, laws which Jesus summarized in the Great Commandment, so that through our love of God and one another trust might emerge and take hold within the church and this world. Trust which, as friends of Jesus, we long to understand and uphold each day of our lives.

Just as we must abide with and trust in Jesus, our friendship with him must also be intimate. “I do not call you servants any longer,” Jesus continued, “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.” By this point in his life and ministry, Jesus had spent years with the disciples. In virtue of their time together, he had come to trust them; trust which had led him to count them as equals and to let them in on the whole secret. He had told them everything he knew about who he was, how God was calling them to live, and the fate that awaited him. These are the special moments of friendship, the moments when we open ourselves up to others by letting them in on the most intimate details of our lives. Being friends with Jesus requires that we be this open with him, while also taking all that he has revealed to us to heart.

And finally, being friends with Jesus will include sacrifice. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” While growing up, I went through a phase where I struggled to say “I love you” to my parents. Not because I didn’t love them, but because I trying

to figure out exactly what that phrase means. Does saying “I love you” mean that you have to be physically attracted to someone, or might it mean something more? Eventually, what I realized is that the people we love are the ones for whom we are willing to make sacrifices. The ones for whom, upon receiving an urgent phone call, we immediately put down what we are doing and rush over. We all have people in our lives who we love and for who would sacrifice just about anything, including our lives. That is how much we are called to love Jesus, and how much love Jesus showed the disciples and us just one day later, when he died on the cross for our sake.

What person in your life comes to mind when I say the word “abiding”? Who comes to mind when I say the word “trusting”? What about when I say the word “intimate” or when I say the word “sacrifice?” We all have people we know and love who embody these four dimensions of friendship. And yet, we too must admit that we hardly ever get all four dimensions with the same person at the same time. The reason why being that friendship is challenging and its dynamics are ever changing. If we required that our friendships always be abiding, trusting, intimate, and sacrificial, my guess is that we would soon find ourselves alone, crushed by the weight of those expectations. The same recognition goes for our friendship with Jesus.

Our friendship with Jesus is at least as complex and as multidimensional as all of our other friendships. There have and will be times when it feels more and less abiding, when we place more and less of our trust in it, when its intimacy feels more and less immediate, and when we regard his sacrifice as words on a page rather than the foundation of our faith. But Jesus still calls us his friends, because friendship is the type of relationship that he desires to have with each one of us. Simply serving Jesus doesn’t require any of these things. All that it requires is that we do our part, our job, thus enabling us to walk away unscathed at the end of the day. No,

friendship means a whole lot more, which might just explain why Jesus waited until the night before his death to tell the disciples who and what they really are.

Which leads us back to our beginning question: why did Jesus call the disciples and not just do it himself? He did so, as we've heard today, because he longed for them to abide with him, to trust in him, to be intimate with him, and to sacrifice for him. He did so because he longed to be their friends, so that through their friendship the disciples might come to share in his joy and make fruit that will last for eternity. Jesus longs to be our friend as well. May we seek to do and be the same, to be Jesus' friends, this and every day of our lives. Amen.