



John 15:9-17
So That You May Believe: John
“I’ll Be There For You”

Rev. Brian North
January 22nd, 2023

All right...we’re beginning this morning’s message with a short video clip. So, I invite you to turn your attention to the screen and enjoy this little **45 second clip**. (Click [here](#) if you're reading this on-line and want to watch it.)

Does that bring back some memories for some of you, perhaps? “Friends” was on NBC for 10 years and was one of the most popular television shows of all-time. Like many great television shows, **“Friends” was popular because of the relationships between the main characters**. Every week, millions of viewers were invited into the fictitious lives of 6 people who loved and cared for each other through thick and thin, through good times and bad times.

From a Christian perspective, there certainly are things to critique about it; but there was also something undeniably powerful about the relationships of the characters in the show. They were an easy group to identify with and relate to. The words to the theme song from the show say it well. The last couple lines of it are: “I’ll be there for you, when the rain starts to pour. I’ll be there for you, like I’ve been there before. I’ll be there for you, 'cause you’re there for me too...”¹ Wouldn't we all like to have a few relationships with people that would fulfill those words, where we know someone is there for us, and we commit to being there for them, as well? There’s a deep longing in each of us, even for the most introverted person, to have a friend or a few of them, who we know love us and care for us, and give us the opportunity to do the same for them.

Jesus has something to say about that in today’s passage, as we continue our series in the Gospel According to John. So, let’s turn to **John 15:9-17**. This God’s Word to you and me this morning...

(Sermon Graphic) As Jesus continues his farewell discourse and final instructions to his disciples, he says some very important things here. What he says continues the vine and branches theme from just before this that we looked at last week, though the metaphor itself is not as prevalent. But in

essence, he is telling them what the fruit is they are to bear. As he does this, he summarizes the essence of his ministry and his teaching, and implores his disciples to carry it on in the same manner. He says that he has modeled “love” for the disciples, he calls them his friends, and he commands them to love one another as friends. And he has some very specific criteria for this kind of friendship: That this kind of friend lays down their life for others.

Jesus tells them that as he is loved by the Father, so Jesus has loved them the same, and he tells them to remain in his love. In other words, let that love be what sustains you; don’t stray from it. That's the basic governing commandment of our lives, for those who follow Jesus: to remain in him. That's not to say we do it well. I know I need help from my family and from my church family and other Christians in my life...but this love that God has for us, and our loving him back, is crucial to the mission that Jesus calls us into.

Then Jesus tells them to love each other as he has loved them. Jesus had a very similar teaching just earlier in the evening when they were eating the Passover meal, back in John 13. So, clearly, this is important. His disciples are to be known for their love – for each other as he says here, but also as he says elsewhere, for how we love others, too. Saint Augustine, the early Christian philosopher and theologian, once said, with regards to abiding in God's love and what that then leads us to do...he said, “Love God and do what you want.” At first, it sounds like a statement that sets you up to live a life of excess and debauchery and living far from God. But the fact is, if you love God – if you really love God – then doing “what you want” will be governed by that love for Him. Our lives will simply be an outpouring of our love for God.

In fact, Jesus' command to love one another is a challenging one, because it’s not just about what we want. It’s not selfish. He is telling us to love one another with a sacrificial love. That’s hard to do. Who really likes to sacrifice their own priorities and time and energy? But this is what Jesus calls us to, and it’s nothing less than he himself did. Jesus loved sacrificially. So, what he’s asking us to do, he’s done, and what he’s asking us to do is built on the love that He has for us.

So, after talking about God's love and their love for each other, Jesus then calls his disciples his friends. **“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” (John 15:15).** A newspaper once held a competition to find out how people would describe friendship. The winning answer was, “A friend is someone who’s walking in when everyone else is walking out.”² Jesus walks into our lives, even before we love him. And first he loves us, and then he calls us friends. Jesus comes to us and offers himself and his love. It's not a love that leaves, but a sacrificial love that puts other people first. And this is how we are to be, as well.

Now, just to be clear: Jesus doesn't need a friend to make him feel good or cheer him up. **Jesus calls us his friend because he partners with us to accomplish his purpose.** It's not that he *needs* friends, but rather that he *chooses* to call us his friend; he says in this passage that he has chosen the disciples. The intent of calling us friend here is more like teammate. Through Jesus Christ, God tells us his plans and purposes, and that makes us his friends, his partners, his teammates, in accomplishing his purposes.

At the core of this friendship is love for his creation, especially for human beings, created in his image. **It’s a love that fosters real, and authentic relationships.** We live in a world that has reduced this notion of “friendship” to a list of people on our social media pages. In some cases, they’re not even called “friends” – they’re called “followers.” In our society, our judgment of friendships is not qualitative, but quantitative – the more friends we have connected to us, the more who follow us, the better.

That kind of mentality leads to the kind of relationship that two particular hunting buddies had. They were out in the northern U.S., getting ready at their camping site to head out for a day of hunting when suddenly one yelled and the other looked up to see a grizzly bear charging them. The first man started to frantically put on his tennis shoes so he could run faster. His friend anxiously asked, “What are you doing? Don't you know you can't outrun a

grizzly bear?” The first man replied, “I don't have to outrun a grizzly. I just have to outrun you!” 😊 Some kind of friend, huh?

But that's not what Jesus means when he calls the disciples, or us, his friends, and charges us all with loving one another. There's an old Jewish proverb that says, “A friend is one who warns you.” I think this story of the hunters tells us that this proverb is incomplete. The guy gave a warning, but he wasn't much of a friend. Perhaps a more complete statement is: **“A friend is one who warns you – and helps you through the storm” (Christian Proverb, circa January, 2023)**. Ecclesiastes 4:9 puts it well, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.” So, it's not how many relationships we have, but how deep they are, that matters. And we see this when Jesus says, “love one another as I have loved you.”

A particular moment from the life of Jackie Robinson is a great example of that kind of love. As probably many of you know, Jackie Robinson was the first black man to play major league baseball. Breaking baseball's color barrier, he faced jeering crowds in every stadium. While playing one day in his home stadium in Brooklyn, he committed an error. The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, humiliated, while the fans jeered. Then, shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over and stood next to him. He put his arm around Jackie Robinson and faced the crowd. The fans grew quiet. Robinson later said that arm around his shoulder saved his career.³

That's the kind of relationship Jesus calls us to. Jesus calls us, in fact it's a command that he gives here – the Greek makes that clear – he commands us to love each other and develop relationships that will have depth, that will be strong, that will endure through thick and thin, where we will be with one another, as well as others, in their moments of trial, shame, grief or whatever it is they're facing. It starts with Jesus, and goes from there to our relationships with other people.

And: For many people in this church, those relationships exist. There are people here who have been with each other through thick and thin, have supported one another as they've raised their children, gone through job transitions, experienced marital difficulties, mourned the loss of loved ones,

celebrated achievements and accomplished goals, and more. With the adoption of JD, I know we've been blessed by people who have given us clothes, a balance bike, a bike with pedals...different stuff that fits his 5-year old body because Elliott outgrew those things when he was three...and we just haven't kept them for the last decade. And some of you who have loved on us we haven't even known all that long, like less than a year in one instance. But for many of you, there are deep bonds of Christian friendship that have been forged throughout the years, even decades.

If you're newer to Rose Hill, you may not yet (emphasis on "yet") have those relationships here. You might have them in other facets of life, and that's totally fine. But stick around long enough, and you'll develop them here. You will be loved and you will have opportunities to love your brothers and sisters in Christ, as well. I can assure you of that.

Now, although Jesus focuses on his disciples love for one another here, it's clear in Jesus' ministry and from the rest of Scripture, that our love is not only for other disciples. Jesus models this: Jesus loved us before we loved him back. So: **Jesus' love is for the world. That means we're called to love people outside the church and outside of Sunday mornings.** God has already put people in your life – in your neighborhood, in your apartment complex, in your retirement community, in your school, your place of work, in your kids' classroom, on your rec-league soccer team or your book club...there are people in those places who God has already put you in relationship with who you can love, and foster real friendships. Those are relationships to pour into with the love of Christ.

I want to encourage you to pick five people, or maybe 5 households, with whom you have some kind of "in person" relationship (not virtual, not just through social media) who you can pray for each day. Pray for the opportunity to grow those relationships. Pray for the opportunity to serve them. Ultimately, we want our payer to be that they are led toward Jesus so they'd be friends with him. That's the aim. We're not just adding to our friends list or our list of followers. We want them to be connected to Jesus. I have to be honest here, however. I mean, I'm always honest (I hope!), how could you trust me as pastor if I weren't...but I need to be clear: God will

almost certainly work through you to be the answer to your prayers. God will put it on your heart how you can love them better, how you can serve them, how you can show them the love of Jesus, how you can lead them toward Jesus. So, these are dangerous prayers. But if we really love God and love these people, if we really want them to know Jesus and his love and his forgiveness and his promise of eternal life: we'll take that risk and make that sacrifice, much as Jesus made a sacrifice for us. So, 5 people in your spheres of life, where you can love them, starting by praying for them.

Now, that doesn't mean we abandon Sundays as opportunities to develop friendships with new people. There are people who come through our doors every Sunday who are new to us. In fact, in the last 15 weeks, not counting Christmas Eve, we have averaged one new visiting household – either an individual, couple, or a family with kids – every Sunday. And surveys show that people will return a few times because ministries for their kids, or because they like the music or the sermon keeps them awake...or maybe because it puts them to sleep and they need a Sunday morning nap ☺ ...but unless they have some sort of meaningful connection within a few Sundays, are loved, and given opportunities to love others, statistics show that they will end up connecting somewhere else. And it's a two- way street: if you're new, you will connect with others by getting involved beyond sitting in the pews on Sundays – participating in a discipleship class, serving in a ministry area, and so forth. The point is: let's keep loving the people God brings us out of the blue on Sunday mornings, in addition to the people he's put in our lives the rest of the week.

So: Jesus calls you his friend, if you are his disciple. **It's a friendship that He has given his life for, because of his love for you.** That right there might be new to you, and you just need to camp out there and begin that relationship to start with. But for many of us, we're already his friend and his disciple. And like the theme song for the TV show Friends says, Jesus says, "I'll be there for you." Let's embody that same kind of friendship, built on sacrificial love – with each other, as well as others in our lives, so people would be led toward Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.

¹"I'll Be There For You" - The Rembrandts. <http://www.lyricsondemand.com/tvthemes/friendslyrics.html>; also available at the YouTube clip linked to in the sermon.

² <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/17897/a-newspaper-held-a-competition-to-find-out-how-by-w-f>

³Leadership Magazine, quoted at www.sermonillustrations.com