

"Friends for Life"

6th Sunday of Easter – 5.9.2021 – John 15:9-17/B

Last Sunday I had the privilege of teaching some of our High Schoolers about the practice of walking a labyrinth. A labyrinth (like the one in our garden) is not a maze, in which you can lose your way, but a path that you follow. And if you follow it faithfully, it will always take you to the center. Walking a labyrinth with others can be a metaphor for the journey of life - and since the path is made of concentric circles in segments - often you may encounter someone coming directly towards you. You may think they are on the same circuit as you are, but right before you would run into each other, one of the paths will make a u-turn, and your fellow traveler will move away from you. Sometimes, you will walk a path parallel to someone, as if you have picked up a companion for your journey. Other times you may feel someone coming up behind you, or your pace may push the person ahead of you. Regardless, each encounter or near miss is descriptive of the folks who come in and out of our lives on a regular, sometimes temporary, basis.

In today's story, Jesus calls his inner circle (and those of us hearing the story) **friends**. Do not let that sentence go unnoticed. *"I have called you friends."* You are one of Jesus' friends. And yet, that relationship is hardly mutual. So why does Jesus call **us** friends? Because, he says, *"...I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father..."* Then, does that make Jesus OUR friend? Well, that's a very good question! From our experience in life we might say "yes!" But Jesus says, *"You are my friends if you do what I command you."* Doesn't sound like a relationship of unconditional love with no strings attached. So, let's look a little deeper and see if we can discover what Jesus might have had in mind.

Friendship changes. And friendships change. If we look back on our lives, we can see that some friends were merely acquaintances, randomly bonded by place or time or situation. These are what I would call "symbolic" because they fall into neat categories - for example, "classmate" or "colleague" or "buddy." There are also those for whom there is never an adequate title. Those are the ones who become companions on your journey - and those are the ones you most often would continue to call "friends."

I never had a best friend growing up. As a kid, I was just part of the neighborhood gang who rode bikes everywhere and answered to anybody's mom who told us "no" "ok" or *"it's time to go home."* Later on, I learned that friends pick friends for games *right away*. No one lets their friend languish in the line for more than one round. But as we grew, I also learned that friendship meant a little less, if you didn't have the skills to add to your team's **Win Potential**. That's why I never got picked first for running sports, but was usually at the top of the pick list for Spelling Bees and Word Games.

In High School I was friends with a set of twins, so there was never any one-on-one time. And so it was that I made it all the way to college before I met my Best Friend Forever, Elizabeth, nickname "Wizzy." We didn't get too close right away, because she thought I was after her boyfriend (I wasn't.) So, after he "left the building", we started to spend more and more time together. Over the years we were in and out of each other's lives, standing up at our weddings, and both of us navigating Stepmotherhood. Some years we were thick as thieves - others, not so much. You know how that goes. Yet each time we could meet - it was the proverbial "as if no time had passed." And there was never enough time to catch up with everything that needed to be caught up on. So, we call, we text, and we write.

Since 1991, we've exchanged *The Birthday Card*, that quotes Winnie the Pooh's Piglet: "Pooh, promise you won't forget about me, ever. Not even when I'm a hundred." Pooh thought for a little. "How old shall I be then?" "*Ninety-nine*." Pooh nodded. "I promise," he said. Our age has always been a joke between us. For I was born two months before Wizzy. Thus, I receive it each September from her, and send it back two months later, in November... she however, must keep track of it for 10 months every year!

Wizzy taught me how to cook artichokes and drink coffee and offer up dollups of southern hospitality. She modelled for me (and my whole stoic German family) how to have a sense of humor - and she has delighted and shocked me more times than I can count with her quick wit, disarming sarcasm and just plain funny sense of humor. Here's one of our favorites: "***Best friends are those who, when you show up at their door with a dead body, say nothing, grab and shovel and follow you...***"

Jesus had friends. He had 12 disciples (and apparently that was one too many!) He traveled with them, lived with them, ate with them, taught them. Most scholars say Jesus' inner circle numbered around 30 - including the 12, some of their family members and some whose encounter with the Son of God had changed their lives. Their relationship to him was life-giving, at the same time that they very well may have been life-draining for him. And yet, he loved...

We choose our friends. Think back over your story. Recall your friends - the ones who were symbolic of a time, place or event - as well as the ones who were and perhaps still are, real relationships. Now imagine which category **Jesus** fits into in your life: Symbol? Friend? And how did you make your choice of friendship with Jesus?

I suspect that you did not choose Jesus for his personality or his prowess. You did not choose Jesus to add depth to your team. And you probably did not choose Jesus, even if he changed your life. Because, in fact, **you** did not choose Jesus at all! In our passage today Jesus states plainly, "*You did not choose me, but I chose you...I have called you friends.*" Take a moment to reflect on that. Jesus was not the God you picked out of a variety of options. Jesus was not your playmate or your boyfriend. Jesus was, and always will be, the One who picked **you** out of the line-up, simply because he saw **you** standing there, in all your humanness - your sinning and your sparkling, your faith and your flaws, your powerlessness and your potential - and then Jesus invited **you** to be a part of his life.

And how could we say no to that? How could you walk away and ignore The One? How could you live your life with its day-to-day troubles and celebrations without including him? Friendship thrives on tending. Oh, true friends, life-giving friends - friends who draw out the best in you and yet love even the worst of you - they will remain even when you take them for granted. Real, true friends will abide with you for life. Their life. Your life.

Finally, let me reframe the roles in my friend's definition of a BFF: Jesus is the friend who, when you appear at his door with a dead body - even your own - gathers you up, takes you inside and tends to your dead person. He listens. He loves. Then he calls you forth from lifelessness, even from death (like Lazarus) - into the brilliance of New Life. Life, as God has promised. For you are Jesus' friend. For Life. **Amen.**

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe, KS.