

The Sixth Sunday of Easter - Year B  
May 17, 2009  
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## “Ask What You Can Do For Jesus”

Acts 10:44-48 . Psalm 98 . I John 5:1-6 . John 15:9-17

When I was a boy, probably as young as five or six I would regularly make friends, and it was a pretty simple endeavor. I would go up to them at the play ground, or in the park, and I'd say “do you wanna be friends?” Usually they would say, “Yes.” And we would be friends, that is, we would play together.

Later, as I grew older I made friends with people who were my neighbors, or who I met at shared activities, like church, or boy scouts, or swim team, or soccer. That kind of friendship mostly involved doing things together that we each enjoyed, or competing with each other. And sometimes along the way we would talk about things, that interested us.

Through middle school and high school, my friendships deepened, and became more about sharing our lives with one another, but they were still primarily self-centered, that is, we were friends because we got something out of the friendship. And our finding and caring for each other was largely coincidental.

In the first semester of college, I thought I had reached a real maturity in choosing and making friends. I chose a few friends from my acquaintances, based on my admiration of their varied characters, and gifts. I truly admired each of them, and enjoyed their company. And I felt like I had discovered true friendship. I was proud of myself for having chosen good friends. But many of them disappointed me when I needed them or struggled in some way.

My experience of friendship deepened after that, but all along, the kind of friendship Jesus is talking about in the gospel we heard today, eluded me. Now the notion of friendship is further diluted by social networking websites like Facebook.

I am an avid user of Facebook, and I recently started a Facebook page for Ascension, as I know many of you use that site as well, but I am disappointed by the way these networking sites dilute our understanding of Friendship.

I have many more Facebook friends, than I have true friends in real life, and while it is entertaining to hear what others are doing, in their day to day lives, many of whom I had lost complete contact with since high school, I doubt that any of them would be available to me in a time of need, or that I would be available to them for that matter. The kind of Friendship Jesus is talking about, is far from that kind of friendship.

Others in the recent past (well 150 years ago, but in Christianity that's pretty recent), have sung of the glory of friendship with Jesus. Many of you probably know the old hymn, "What a Friend we have in Jesus." It was a favorite for a long time, and when I served as a Chaplain at Florida Hospital, the group of men from engineering, who met for prayer at 7 AM every Thursday before work would sing it almost every week.

In case it's not singing in your head already, it starts off "What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!" ("what a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer.")

Even this notion of friendship is somewhat self-centered. It speaks of Jesus as our friend, as the one who comforts us and consoles us, and bears our burdens and our griefs. We almost always take it for granted, that friendship is what others give to us.

In the course of faith development, most faithful Christian pre-teens and teenagers, are likely to describe Jesus as their best friend. For them, it's all about what He does for us. And honestly, very few of us get past that stage of faith. The kind of friendship that Jesus is talking about in our Gospel, is deeper and more challenging than that.

I admit, I took it for granted, the first time I read this passage last week as I began to think about this sermon. "I have called you friends," Jesus says. How nice. How nice indeed, we are friends. But if you look at the way Jesus describes this friendship, you will see, He is not a Facebook friend, nor does He expect us to be that to Him.

When He first mentions Friends in speaking to his closest disciples, He sets the standard very high. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Seldom will any of us have a chance, to prove our friendship to those we love, by laying down our lives for their sakes. But Jesus did, and He knew He was going to, when he was speaking to His disciples.

After that statement we get directly to the point, of Friendship with Jesus, it's not about what He does for us, it's about what we do for Him.

"You are my friends, if you do what I command you." This is not the kind of friendship that puts a status update out there on the internet, or shares a fun quiz or game with acquaintances.

This is a friendship with one who has the authority to issue commands. He may love you and I, as He does. He may even die for us, as He did for everyone in the world, whether they follow Him or not. But if we want Him to call us friends, we need to do what He asks of us. And He reminds us we did not choose Him, as I was so proud of choosing those friends in college, but Jesus chose us, and He chose us for a purpose.

Jesus surrounds all of this by reassurances that He loves us, and that God the Father loves us. The love he talks about is Agape love, unconditional love, love that accepts us for who we are, where we are, and loves us sacrificially without expectation of return. While God does love us with Agape love, and nothing is expected to earn His love - Faithfully following Jesus' commandments, is the way to show that we want to be His Friends, that we are His Friends, requires that we show our gratitude, for the Love that is freely given to us.

Mark Twain once said "I can live for two months, on a good compliment." But Jesus' is not looking for flattery or even just our sincere Words of Affirmation. What He wants from His friends, is our actions, putting our money where our mouth is. That's what He is telling us here. And other places, like when he asks Peter, "Do you love me?" and then tells him, "Feed my sheep."

Jesus does not want our empty words of praise, or for us to be simple yes-men, servants who simply say what they think the master wants to hear. The commandments of Jesus are simple, though they take a lifetime to master - Love God with All your Heart, and Love your neighbor as yourself.

In other words, put every one before you, and live not for yourself, but for the other, for God and for his Creation. Again, a tall order, but nothing compared to dying for your friends' sake.

It is comforting, and valuable to think of all that Jesus does for us, and to consider Him our friend because of that. But that leaves us in a hard place in our faith, when we fall on hard times. I've met too many people, who say, what did I do to deserve this? Why am I so miserable? Why is God doing this to me? Didn't God promise life would be easy? Isn't God my friend anymore?

Here Jesus is saying, that His serving you, is not the basis of the friendship. The friendship Jesus is talking about, means "a friend of the court." Jesus is the King, and we could simply be subjects, but He has raised us above that status. We are his friends, when we do what He asks us to do. And He will share everything with us.

As His disciples, we are His servants, his followers, but he is taking us by the hand, and raising us to another level. But it's still not about us, what He does for us, but what we do for Him, that proves our friendship.

As JFK famously challenged the people of this great country, I would say to you as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, Ask not what Jesus can do for you, Ask what you can do for Jesus! His desire for us, is that we bear fruit, fruit that will last.

You know fruit is all about reproduction, that is, we are branches of this growing vine, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, and we are empowered to produce more fruit. To show Jesus you are his friend, you are to make more fruit, out of the seeds that are planted all around you. Help your friends become grafted onto the same vine, so that they can produce fruit with you. And become friends of Jesus as you are.

All this explains more deeply, what God requires of us, when He asked us to Love our Neighbors as ourselves. What is more loving than to offer your neighbors, your friends, your enemies, the gift of eternal joy, everlasting life, abiding in God's love? Jesus gives us the good news, so that His joy will be in us. This is what will make our joy complete!

Love one another, means give the joy of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus' love to everyone around you! This is the fruit that will last. It will last in those around you, forever.

I want to tell you a little story about friendship, about a favorite artist of mine. His name was Albrecht Durer, he painted in Switzerland in the 15th Century. From childhood Albrecht Durer wanted to paint. Finally, he left home to study with a great artist. He met a friend who also had this same desire and the two became roommates. Both being poor, they found it difficult to make a living and study at the same time. Albrecht's friend offered to work while Albrecht studied. Then when the art began to sell, his Friend would have his chance.

After much persuasion, Albrecht agreed and worked faithfully while his friend toiled long hours to make a living. The day came when Albrecht sold a wood-carving and his friend went back to his paints, only to find that the hard work had stiffened and twisted his fingers and he could no longer paint with skill.

When Albrecht learned what had happened to his friend, he was filled with great sorrow. One day returning home unexpectedly he heard the voice of his friend and saw the gnarled, toilworn hands folded in prayer before him. "I can show the world my appreciation by painting his hands as I see them now, folded in prayer." It was this thought that inspired Albrecht Durer when he realized that he could never give back to his friend the skill which had left his hands.

Durer's gratitude was captured in his inspired wood cut print that has become world famous. And, we are blessed by both the beauty of the painting and the beautiful story of gratitude and true friendship.

Jesus, your friend, gave more than his hands for your benefit. He gave his whole life for you. Of course you can never repay him for that act of friendship and love. Like Durer and his friend you cannot undo what was done to Jesus on your behalf. But in gratitude, you can give your best gifts to Him, and help Him as one of His friends.

When you are Jesus' friend, you truly give to Christ the best of what you have to offer, instead of what is left over, from what you have given to yourself. When you serve him with your best, you will find that his Joy begins to overflow in you, your joy will be complete.

What can you do this week, this month, this year, to show Jesus that you are His Friend?

Sure, "what a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and pains to bear," is a comforting statement, but participating in the great plan of the King of the Universe, showing Him we are his friends, by doing whatever He asks of us, that is where our joy is made complete, and where we begin to approach, the mature friendship, that Jesus desires for us.

Ask not what Jesus can do for you. Ask what you can do for Him!