

Reading: John 15:9-17

It has been building over these last three weeks. First it was Jesus the good shepherd. The original pastoral care. Then it was the image of the vine. An image of being connected to Jesus and to each other, in order to bear fruit. Today Jesus takes it to the next level: "You are my friends," he says, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant doesn't know what the master is doing, but I call you friends."

It's worth pausing for a moment to take in what Jesus is actually saying. In many ways the whole Bible has been building to this point. Remember how the Hebrews would carry ark of the covenant around with fear and trembling. God's presence was so holy, so terrifying, that if anyone touched the ark they would die. Later, God was present in the Temple, a place so holy and so terrifying that only a single male priest from the right tribe, on the right day, saying the right words dared to enter the most holy place, the Holy of Holies. And then God came to us in the person of Jesus, and this holy God, present in Jesus, the same Jesus who has, as we sing, flung stars into space, through whom everything was made, as we say in the creed, is calling us friends.

It's really so radical, so deep, that we can scarcely get our tiny heads around it.

Jesus has every right to treat us as servants. This is what the disciples would have been expecting. Slaves after all kept the Roman empire ticking. But this Jesus, who we could (and do) call Lord and Master and Sovereign of the Universe, is calling us friends.

Even if you don't have much to do with grapevines, or sheep, all of us have friends. We know about friendship.

Recently I got all my friends together. I hired a phone box for the occasion.

But Jesus takes this friendship thing to a whole new level. It's not enough for him just to say, "I'm your friend," but he is so loving that he gives up his life for us. We see true friendship - true love, when one person willingly dies for another.

Jack was in the trenches in the First World War. Across no man's land he could hear his friend dying. His friend Paddy was caught on some barbed wire and was calling out to be rescued. So Jack went to his superior officer. "Permission to go and rescue Paddy, sir," he asked. "Permission denied. It's too dangerous." But Jack went anyway. He crawled out just on dusk to his friend. Took him across his shoulder and carried him back to the trench. Just as he was about to enter the safety of the trench, a lone sniper got Jack too. By this time Paddy was dead and Jack lay bleeding. The officer was furious. "Now I've lost you both!" he said. "But tell me was it worth it?" Jack replied "O yes. When I got to Paddy, he said, 'Thank you Jack. I knew you would come.'"

Jesus shows us his true friendship by dying for us. But the central truth of Christianity and the whole meaning of the Scriptures is that the Christ who died is now alive. And we can have eternal friendship with him. He is our beloved brother, one of us, yet from the heart of God.

So how do we have a lasting friendship with Jesus?

It is really no different from having a lasting friendship with another person. We make time for them.

If we stop listening to our friends and stop making time for them, then they are friends in name only.

Prayer is the way we talk and enjoy the company of Jesus. Not necessarily great formal words, although they have their place, but simple conversation like you would another friend.

We enjoy each other's company. Some of the best times we have with close friends happen when we are in each other's presence, not doing stuff, just hanging out. Simply allowing ourselves to sit in the love of God is a time-honored way of being in Jesus' presence. We don't have to do anything outrageous; God in Jesus is already searching us out.

A third way of being a friend of Jesus is to speak well of him and his church. If I go around badmouthing my friends eventually the question arises why have such a terrible friend. Rather we say things like, "I went to the movies with my friend, and it was really fun". "I went to church the other day," we could say, "and it was really uplifting." Or we could say, "I get so much out of my daily prayer time."

Sometimes we forget that we have friendship with Christ at all.

The gifts that come from being Jesus' friends are enormous.

We have his comforting presence always and everywhere. In friendship with Jesus we become better people, showing the fruits of the Spirit more and more in our lives. He calls us beyond ourselves to a deeper compassion for others and a stewarding care for our world.

But why bother? In verse 11 Jesus gives us the reason: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy might be complete."

In 1974 Henri Nouwen wrote: *When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who*

*can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.*

And Jesus said, "You are my friends."