

6th Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2018
John 15:9-17
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Who is the person or persons with whom you have a relationship that you would describe as a “BFF” relationship – “best friends forever”? Perhaps it is or was your spouse. Or it may be another person you’ve known since high school or college. Or possibly even a childhood chum, sibling, or cousin. My “BFF” is Bob. Bob and I met at Drew Theological School in 1987, when we were both studying to become United Methodist pastors, so we have known each other for thirty years. Bob is five years older than me. He grew up in New York, the son of a Baptist father and a Roman Catholic mother. He is the middle child in a family of six kids. Bob is married and has been blessed with children and grandchildren. Bob is a flaming extrovert, and very self-confident. He is a keen student of history and loves to tell stories. He is a man of deep faith. He has a great sense of humor, is deeply compassionate and patient, and has a true gift of hospitality. He experiences deep joy when he gives to others. Over the years Bob has learned to speak Spanish, which is very helpful since his grandchildren are being raised to speak both Spanish and English. When we speak on the phone or in email notes, Bob often concludes by saying, “Te amo.” “I love you.”

Much has been written about the nature of friendship. Jess C. Scott said: “Friends are the family you choose.” A.A. Milne in the words of Winnie the Pooh says: “A friend is someone who helps you up when you’re down, and if they can’t, they lay down beside you and listen”, and on another occasion Pooh says, “A friend is one of the nicest things you can have and one of the best things you can be.”

One of my favorite quotes about friendship in the words of Dinah Maria Mulock Craik reads: “Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.”

The author Jon Katz reflects on friendship: “I think if I’ve learned anything about friendship, it’s to hang in, stay connected, fight for them, and let them fight for you. Don’t walk away, don’t be distracted, don’t be too busy or tired, don’t take them for granted. Friends are part of the glue that holds life and faith together. Powerful stuff.”

We have this beautiful gospel passage today in which Jesus continues talking with the disciples, preparing them for his departure. John chapters 14-17 have been called Jesus’ “farewell discourse”, the final thoughts he shares with the disciples before he is arrested, tried, and put to death. Though his death is imminent, he seeks to reassure

them that the relationship they have built over their three years together will last, no matter what is to come. It will last, Jesus tells them confidently because of the love in God they share. Last Sunday we heard from the beginning of John 15 where Jesus refers to himself as the true vine, God as the vine grower, and Jesus' followers as the branches. Over and over again John uses that word "abide". This gospel keeps talking about staying, about making our home in God, in the body of Christ. John's emphasis is on the disciples remaining close to Jesus, dwelling in, abiding in him so that their lives will be fruitful, and so that they will be supported in living Jesus' way. In today's passage there is again this emphasis on the need to abide - to abide in Jesus' love. He says: *"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. You did not choose me but I chose you."*

In his commentary on John, Gerard Sloyan writes: "Jesus puts matters directly quite early in the relationship, saying something like: 'We shall be friends, you and I. No more of this, I up here and you down there, you the object of my affection and I the subject of your veneration. We are both subjects undergoing the passion and pain of love.'" Jesus' message is that the disciples will flourish only as they give themselves in love freely to one another. We are known and held and loved by Christ. But we are commanded too, to belong to one another, to care for one another, to love one another.

So what do you think it might look like to be a "BFF" (best friend forever) of Jesus? I got to thinking about my "BFF" Bob, and the characteristics of our deep abiding and loving friendship. We spend time together – sometimes in person, sometimes by phone, sometimes through email notes. Normally, no more than a month goes by before we "check in" with each other. We listen to each other. We make space to share what's on our hearts – there is a dependability and steadfastness developed over thirty years' time. We can say to each other, "So how is it with your spirit?" which is another way of saying, "How is your friendship with Jesus these days?" There is a deep level of trust, so that we can laugh and cry and share the stuff that matters most to us – which we have done many times and continue to do. We offer encouragement and compassion to each other. Through our friendship I feel cared for, valued, and cherished, which brings me great joy and peace. I think Bob treasures the precious gift of our friendship similarly. I know I have become more authentically myself through Bob's friendship. My life is larger and richer than it would be without the bond we share in Christ.

I know this goodness and joy is a taste of what it means to be "BFsF" (best friends forever) with Jesus. Living with this kind of mutual love in the Christian community was very important to the gospel writer John. Loving is complicated and difficult at times.

There are blessings and challenges involved with the kind of love Jesus lived out and called his disciples to continue sharing. They weren't perfect. Amongst the twelve disciples there was sin, corruption, conflict, jockeying for position, and absence of love. Jesus told them, showed them how important it was to serve each other, rather than compete with each other. Jesus' hope was that the world would learn something about God through the disciples' loving one another, even as they did so imperfectly. It was important that they continue to be students in the school of God's love.

Have you found it to be true that sometimes we forget that God dearly loves even the people who make us crazy? God adores all of us enough to be patient with us, to want what's good for us. And what's good for us is love. What everyone needs to flourish is love. As the preacher Bishop Darrin Moore said in his sermon for the funeral of The Rev. Allie Harper earlier this week, "Sometimes we experience a brother or sister in the community of faith like sandpaper rubbing us the wrong way. We don't like that feeling of having our rough edges smoothed off." He said that sometimes people will walk away from their faith community saying, "I don't need this hassle". Or "I'm spiritual but not religious". What we miss out on when we walk away from the discomfort that can accompany disagreement or conflict in the faith community is the invitation to be stretched and shaped in the self-giving love of Christ.

The Rev. Carla Pratt Keyes tells the story of a small group in Mississippi called the Antioch community.

They had been trying to live out racial reconciliation and were having a hard time of it. They had reached a crisis in their life together. In the midst of the crisis a wise friend told them: "You don't grow into God's love by making demands of each other. You do it by giving each other grace. Grace involves acting with love when it doesn't seem fair or reasonable and when others are being complete jerks. It's hard because we can't stand the idea of not fixing each other. Insofar as there is anything we can do to fix people at all, it's only by forgiving them and giving them grace. And leaving them to God who loves them like a mother and father.

This wise friend continued with all direct frankness, "Grace assumes there is sin within any family or community. Grace assumes insensitivity, occasional stupidity, rudeness, arguments. The goal is not to ignore those things. When Christ asks us to accept each other he isn't asking us to ignore the hurts between us. People of grace speak the truth. But in an atmosphere of grace truth seems less offensive and more important. The key is to get the love of God into your bones and to live as if you are forgiven. It is enough to care for each other, to forgive each other, and to wash the dishes." (From the online website: A Sermon for Every Sunday, May 6, 2018).

According to the gospel writer John, friendship with Jesus is at the center of what it means to live faithfully. And it necessarily means we are called to pay that love forward, especially to each other in the community of faith. Just as it did for the disciples,

friendship serves as training ground in teaching us how to love. The Christian community is intended to help us support each other in being Jesus' "BFsF" (best friends forever) and living Jesus' love out in our relationships with each other, trying our best to love as we have been loved.

In Jesus' self-giving love and in our friendships we can catch glimpses of what it means to radiate the goodness and holiness of God in the world. Friends of Jesus is who we are. Chosen by Christ, we are appointed to go and bear lasting fruit, blessing the world with Christ's love. This, brothers and sisters, is what friends are for. This, brothers and sisters, is what Trinity Church is to be – together, best friends of Jesus forever.

Amen.