

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 55: 10-13  
SECOND LESSON: John 15:9-17  
May 5, 2024

***“A Friend of God”***  
Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

Two elderly ladies had been best friends for over sixty years. They had shared all kinds of adventures and the ups and downs of life. Lately, their activities had been limited to meeting a few times a week to play cards. One day they were playing cards when one looked at the other and said, “Now don't get mad at me, I know we've been friends for a long time, but I just can't think of your name! I've thought and thought, but I can't remember it. Please tell me what your name is.”

Her friend glared at her. For at least three minutes she just stared and glared. Finally, she said, “How soon do you need to know?”

In the scripture we read this morning Jesus calls us friends, but he definitely remembers our names. He begins, however, by saying, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”

What does it mean to “remain” in God's love? Sometimes the word used is “abide,” but we don't commonly use expressions like that anymore. The word means to stay in a particular place. Maybe we could even use slang and say, “hanging out” with God. It's being with someone and feeling totally at home. To remain in God's love is to be immersed in it, surrounded by it and comfortable in it. But there's a catch here. Jesus goes on to say that the way to “remain” in God's love is to keep his commandments.

John's gospel doesn't give us a lot in the way of commandments. Matthew, Luke and Mark, that's a different story. The sermon on the mount and on the plain and all of the parables and teaching moments are filled with what could be called commandments. All of them, however, are crystalized in the twofold command of Jesus to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. Every “law” truly does break down to love. If we love someone, we will not harm them by stealing from them. If we love someone, we will not injure or kill them. If we love someone, we will not have an affair with their spouse. If we love someone, we will do everything to ensure that they are paid fairly and protected from injury at work.

The model Jesus uses is comparison. It is “just as.” Jesus says, “just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love” you should keep my commands and remain in my love. Our role model is the relationship between Jesus and his father. Jesus kept his father's commandments even when they were at their most painful—even in the face of the cross. Jesus gives us the perfect model of obedience to God. He lay down his life for us. He could have said no. He could have refused. But instead, he lined his will up with God's

and endured the unendurable for us. And Jesus tells us, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

There are no doubt extreme situations in which we might be literally in the position to lay down our life for another. There are also many dangerous vocations that involve personal risk in order to save people. But on a daily basis, and in an ordinary sense, to lay down our life for our friends is to give of our time and talents freely in order to help in a practical way. Acquaintances send you a card welcoming you to your new home. Friends come help you pack boxes and move. Acquaintances wave from a distance. Friends sweat alongside you. Laying down our lives involves choosing to make personal sacrifices of time, energy and money. In our world “I love you” sometimes just means “I want you,” and I only want you as long as you are doing something that benefits me. It’s about possessing a person for selfish reasons. But true love always acts in the best interest of the other person. Jesus loves us in this way, saying that we are not just servants of God, but friends of God. Jesus shares with us his vision and plans. And because we are friends, we also have access that servants or strangers do not. Friends are available to talk. Friends support one another.

Our friendship with Jesus is unique, however, because unlike most friends, it is not between equals. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Jesus chose his disciples, and Jesus chose us. And he didn’t seek out only the brightest and the best. Jesus chose a very random group of people with very unequal skills. Jesus chose people who were loud and people who were quiet, people who fished for a living and people who collaborated with the enemy to collect taxes. He chose women forced to survive on the streets in the only way they could; he chose lepers; and he chose children. Jesus even chose Roman centurions. Jesus chose Judas, knowing he would betray him. And the purpose for which Jesus chose everyone, the original disciples and us in the present, is so that that we might bear fruit. We are given a job. We have been appointed by God to bear good fruit.

We don’t live in an agrarian culture, so the imagery of bearing fruit does not come naturally to us. Our idea of productivity is more mechanical and removed from the natural world. We think of factories and offices. We think of “things.” But bearing fruit is actually a much better image because of the organic nature of it. A healthy tree or plant produces fruit. If it is pruned correctly and given the right soil and enough water, it will produce more fruit. It is a living thing. We are alive. If we are connected to God and abiding in God then the Spirit of God will enable us to naturally produce “fruit.” But what is this fruit? What are we talking about? We are talking about a life centered in love and everything that grows out of that.

Most Americans do not start out with the goal of becoming the most loving person that they can. In fact, loving others means putting them first, which runs directly contrary to climbing the corporate ladder. Loving others means spending time listening and helping, and our society says that time is money. Loving others means being willing to be hugely inconvenienced to help someone in need, and we are told we have the right to pursue our own happiness. Regardless of our particular life vocation, each one of us is called to be God’s servant in the world. We’re here to help one another. If there’s a car

accident, we stop. If a stranger has fallen on the street, we help them. If the person in line in the checkout is just a little bit short of cash and can't pay for all their groceries, we quietly make up the difference. If someone is sad and needs to talk, we listen, even if they are a complete stranger. We keep our eyes open. We keep our hearts open.

It's been said that justice is what love looks like in public, and when love extends beyond helping the individual it usually takes the form of working for justice. Jesus says we have been appointed to bear fruit that will last, and working to bring justice to victims of injustice will do just that. The prophets have made it clear throughout the centuries that it is the poor and oppressed who are on God's heart. Christians throughout the centuries have both succeeded and failed at this. Sometimes we have produced fruit that lasts. Routine infanticide and child prostitution was ended in the early centuries of the church, by Christians. Has it been eliminated? Of course not. But it is no longer an acceptable practice or a taxable institution. Slavery was ended, by Christians. Does it still happen around the world? Yes, and we must still oppose it doing what we can to end human trafficking. Public education was brought into existence, by Christians. Do all children have the same opportunity for a good education? No, but we are called to continue to strive in that direction. Sometimes the fruit of our work feels inadequate and limited in nature, but if we have made a difference in even one life, we have served God.

If we abide in God's love, if we remain in God's love because we live a life of love, Jesus gives us the promise that whatever we ask in his name the Father will give us. This promise has often been taken out of context, but it must be read in context. Jesus is saying that if we dwell in the center of God's will, then what we ask will be in God's will. We haven't been given a magic formula to get what we want. But the closer we dwell with God and the more we abide in God's presence, the more our prayers will align with God's will. If we remain in God's love, God's Spirit will work through us. Amen.

Isaiah 55: 10-13

<sup>10</sup> As the rain and the snow  
come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it  
without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
<sup>11</sup> so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.  
<sup>12</sup> You will go out in joy  
and be led forth in peace;  
the mountains and hills  
will burst into song before you,  
and all the trees of the field  
will clap their hands.

<sup>13</sup> Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,  
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.  
This will be for the Lord's renown,  
for an everlasting sign,  
that will endure forever.”

John 15:9-17

<sup>9</sup> “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.<sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup> This is my command: Love each other.