
I Call You Friends

John 15: 9-17

A Sermon preached at St Martin-in-the-Fields on April 24, 2024 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

You're showing a child, or a colleague, or a relative how to perform a straightforward yet delicate task – threading a needle maybe, or untying a knot, or sifting flour, or following a shopping list to the very end. And time after time they make all kinds of daft but exasperating mistakes – the needle ends up on the floor, the knot is tighter than before, the flour is all over the kitchen counter, the vital ingredient is left behind at the supermarket, you grit your teeth and shake your hands like the misunderstood and underappreciated genius that you are, and think 'Why do I bother? I might as well do it myself!'

I wonder why Jesus bothered calling 12 disciples. Why didn't he just do it himself? Most of the time the disciples seem to be more trouble than they're worth. At the last supper in John's version Jesus sits his disciples down and says, here's what it's all about. We call these words the Farewell Discourses. They go on for five chapters and fall into seven parts. The central part, part four, is the passage we've just read. Jesus tells his disciples, 'You're not my staff, you're not my servants, you're not my slaves – you're my friends.' Jesus tells us how he wants us to relate to him from now on. We're to do what he does, be where he is, and see the way he sees, because we're to be his friends. Now we discover the four things that matter about friendship. Here they are.

Number one, friendship abides. I have a cartoon of a man and a gorilla sitting next to each other at a bar, and the man is putting a cheerful arm around the gorilla and saying to the bartender, 'He and I go way back.' In its simplest sense, a friend is someone you've spent a lot of time with. You may not know each other well, but you've been in the same congregation, lived on the same street, taken the same class. The friendship may not have come to very much, but suddenly in a crisis it can mean a great deal.

Number Two, friendship is about trust. Jesus uses the word 'command' or 'commandment' five times in this passage. The point is that only in a community that keeps the rules it sets for itself can trust truly emerge. And without trust you haven't got much hope of friendship. Friendship and trust are what law is about in the Bible from the very beginning. The laws are there in the Bible to help us discover what it means to be friends of God and friends of one another. 'I thought you were a friend.' When one hears those words there's a profound sadness because there's a recognition that some level of mutual expectation has been broken, even if it's never been precisely articulated.

Number three, friendship is about intimacy. These are special moments in friendship. 'I guess you ought to know my father spent a long time in prison.' 'I just wanted to tell you that I had Martha before I married Bill. Bill's always treated Martha the same as the others but I just felt like I wanted you to know.' Friendship is about knowledge, about understanding, about sharing the unknown and the fragile and together groping towards the true and the hopeful.

And then we get the big one. Number four, friendship is about sacrifice. 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' This is precisely what Jesus is about to do. What would *you* lay down your life for? Or perhaps better, *who* would you lay down your life for? Now's the time to ask the question, because when it comes to the laying down it may happen very suddenly, and you may not have a whole lot of time to figure out the answer. What's the best way to die? Jesus gives a simple answer: the best way to die is to die for a friend.

Friendship gets confusing when these four aspects fail to overlap – when you've got trust and intimacy but no abiding, which is where you impulsively decide this person you just met is the most amazing person ever; or when you've got intimacy but suddenly realize there's no trust, which can feel terrifying and very vulnerable, and close to betrayal; or where there's trust but you can't or can't any longer find any intimacy, which is where a friendship can somehow dry up. Friendship leads to misunderstanding when one person only really wants or knows how to give the intimacy thing while the other only really wants or knows how to give the trust thing. And most amazing of all, sometimes you realize someone has made an incredible sacrifice for you when you really didn't know them all that well.

In reality we hardly ever get all four dimensions of friendship with the same person at the same time. And that's ok – in fact it's healthy, because to expect a friendship to be abiding, trusting, intimate, and sacrificial all at one go is probably putting more weight on it than one friendship can bear.

The same goes for our friendship with God. There'll be times when that friendship is abiding, like a computer screen switched to hibernate mode. There'll be times when God is constant. A child was asked the question, 'Is there anything God can't do?' and the child answered, 'God can't stop loving us.' That's what it means for God to keep the commandments. There'll be times when God is intimate with us. But that won't be all the time. And there'll be times when we know the sacrificial friendship of God, when the words 'Christ died for me' won't be words in a song but will be the wind beneath our wings. But the truth is we sometimes

miss each of these aspects of friendship with God. Sometimes we miss God's abiding, or trust, or intimacy. Sometimes it feels we're the ones making the sacrifice and getting nothing back. But not usually all four at the same time.

Jesus doesn't call us his servants. But he also doesn't call us his clients. And the reason is because these kinds of formal relationships are ways of avoiding the scary dimensions of friendship. To serve someone or to be served by someone means you don't have to be their friend. You don't have to abide, you don't have to trust, you don't have to be intimate, you don't have to sacrifice – you can just do your piece and walk away unscathed. If we called it an offer of friendship it would be a whole lot more frightening. It might have to go on a long time, it might have to be within rules that are mutually agreed, it might mean an intimacy that means I could be changed. I could be hurt. I could experience a personal cost. It might involve sacrifice. It might end up becoming the centre of my life.

Scary word, friendship. You can see why we stick to service. Much safer. Suddenly we can see why Jesus leaves it till the night before his death to tell his disciples who they really are.

And that brings us back to our question. Why *did* Jesus call 12 disciples? Why didn't he just do it all himself? Because he didn't want his big secret to be a secret forever. His big secret, scary as it may be, is that we have been invited to share the very life of God. Not to bring it about like servants or to buy our way into it like clients. But to share it – the wonderful parts and the painful parts – to share it as friends. To be a disciple is to abide in Jesus, to trust and be trusted by Jesus, to be intimate with Jesus, and finally to lay down your life for him as he does for you. That's what it means to be God's friend. That's what it means to be a member of the Nazareth Community.