

That's What Friends are For

In the recently released movie, “Our Friend,” a guy named Dane moves in with his friends Matt and Nicole after Nicole is diagnosed with late stage cancer. Dane jumps into life with this family in crisis and does what needs doing. He washes dishes, does laundry, cleans house, carpools Matt and Nicole’s daughters to school and extra-curricular activities and he listens to them and grieves with them as Nicole faces the end of life. The movie is based on a true story. There really is a Dane in the world – a guy who set aside his own life in order to help his friends through a really difficult time.

In this week’s Bible passage Jesus tells us that this is what friends are for. Friends are there for you when you need them. Friends are there for you to help in all life’s circumstances.

This passage is the end of the passage that we looked at last week – the final verses of John 15 – and they are words being uttered just before Jesus is crucified – spoken to the individuals who have put their trust in Him. In part these words are foreshadowing and in part an explanation. For those he calls friends Jesus Christ will lay down His life, the ultimate loving sacrifice – something most human beings will not be called to do in a literal sense; but are often called to do figuratively.

In the first part of John 15 Jesus calls His disciples to abide as branches in the true vine, Jesus Christ, and allow the vine keeper, God, to produce good fruit from them. In a continuation of his thought, in this week’s passage Jesus commands His disciples to love one another in a very specific way – as He has loved them. The Message translation of the Bible includes the phrase, “This is the very best way to love.” Jesus then lets them know that they are now his “friends” when they obey Him. So, they are abiding together as a group indistinguishable as loving friends of Jesus.

Early on in the ministry journey together, Christ referred to His followers as “Servants.” Now, though, He points out that they are no longer going to be called servants because servants don’t know what the master is planning – servants don’t have a handle on the agenda whereas

friends know the details of each other's lives. Just because the disciples will no longer be called servants doesn't mean that they won't still serve; but it does mean they will be closer to Jesus than a servant would be.

I see the difference as akin to the difference between a paid staff person who works in a home (the image that comes to mind for me is the staff of "Downton Abbey") who were told what to do and carried out their orders versus someone like Dane who moved into the home of his friends without an expectation of compensation or reward. The relationship that Dane had with his friends in the face of a terminal illness was openness and honesty about everything with one another. Dane still served his friends; but he did so as a member of the family would have.

If you are someone like me who struggles with the idea of your Lord and Savior as your buddy or pal, I have some good news for you. Jesus' idea of friendship goes beyond that of being a pal. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus, friendship was an institution similar to that of a patron-client. It was not a relationship with equal status or reciprocity. Friendship as Jesus' disciples would have understood it was a subordinate relationship of authority.

Bible teacher Warren Weirsbe describes this type of friendship as being like that of a king's inner circle. This description fits well with the idea of Jesus' command (note it's not a suggestion) to love one another. Jesus offers protection like that of a king in exchange for loyalty in the form of obedience. At the heart of the vision that Christ is offering is a community's love for one another. Love that must be lived out in community. Because if you claim to love others without actually being together with them what you have is just a theory.

The benefits to the disciple/friend in loving community include divine wisdom (a knowledge of God's plan and purpose as conveyed through Christ), access to God through prayer (this was also mentioned earlier in the chapter), answered prayer and the opportunity to produce good fruit that will last.

In the movie I've mentioned, Matt and Nicole's friend, Dane, helps them scratch items off of Nicole's bucket list. Dane looks after the couple's children so that Nicole has time to write

letters to them for the special moments in their life that she won't be there for; he makes phone calls so that Nicole can be the Grand Marshall of Mardi Gras and he makes sure that she can read her girls "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy.

I'm not aware that Jesus had a bucket list before His crucifixion, but I believe, as friends, we have a responsibility to carry on the work that Jesus started in the world. We are to carry on the work on one another. Here are just a few of the "One Another" statements found in the Bible: Honor one another; live in harmony with one another; look to the interests of one another; comfort one another; be patient with one another; teach one another and (one of my personal favorites) speak to one another with words of encouragement from the Bible. All of these – and many others – are ways that we help carry on the Kingdom of God and show the world the love of God for it. I believe the "One Another" statements that Jesus made are His "To Do" list for us. They are the list we are called to complete while here on earth as His friends.

I would love to tell you that this is easy to accomplish, but this "To Do" list is difficult. And I think Jesus (and Paul) knew that this would be a tough job. That's why Paul, in his letters to the early churches, told those first Christians that this new way of being in the world (as friends of Jesus) means "giving all things;" "hoping all things;" and "enduring all things." This is a message the Church needs to hear today too. How do we do it – this hard thing?

One thing I have found that helps me in this task of loving others as Jesus does is to remind myself of what is stated in verse 16: We (Christ's friends) are chosen and appointed by none other than Christ Himself. Chosenness, along with an assigned position, assures me that we are all equipped with all we need.

When you feel overwhelmed and unable to handle challenging circumstances, remember that those God calls, God always equips. And God has called the Church – including Mitchell's Church – to bear witness to the love of Christ, as it is portrayed in this passage and in the passage from First John. "Love the children of God by loving God and obeying God's commands."

And the John passage also reminds us that when the directive comes from God it conquers the world. In the words of Christian singer Mandisa, we are overcomers called to stay in the fight ‘til the final round.

When we apply today’s Scripture lessons to the Church we find a place for ourselves to inhabit the Kingdom of God. We find a habitat for humanity, a neighborhood with love at its center. And in God’s habitat for humanity, as with the organization Habitat for Humanity, when someone applies to have a home built they must commit to be part of building that home. Those chosen will have help, but they must take part in the building. The same is true of the Christian Church. Scripture shows God creating, redeeming, healing and laying down life – this God who formed us in His image is the heart of the place where we abide, and the help we need to create that place.

I like the song, “That’s What Friends are For,” written by Burt Bacharach and Carol Bayer Sager, and I am especially fond of the lyrics, “Through good times and bad times, I’ll be by your side forevermore.” And I’m wondering today whether we can say (or sing) these lyrics about our relationship to Jesus Christ. Can we obey the command to love through good times and bad times? Can we stay by the side of Jesus Christ when others tell us that we’re being foolish? When we sing, “What a Friend we have in Jesus,” are we thinking solely of the type of friend Jesus is to us, or are we thinking about how to befriend Him at all times?

Unlike the other Gospels which exhort us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, John’s Gospel exhorts us to love those close at hand. John’s message from Jesus is that by loving the ones you live with you can really impact the world’s view of God. As I’ve already mentioned, it’s a tough thing to do – but that’s what makes it so impactful.

Church is to be that place where friendship involves more than “likes” on social media. And as technology, social media and other factors change the contours of relationships and friendships, it’s more important than ever that this be the case. Church ought to always be the place where relationships are real and long lasting; where prayers are often lifted and names and

stories are known and carefully treasured. Church is called to be the place where all are welcome to abide and all will find friends.

A seminary student being interviewed by a pastor nominating committee was asked what she believed to be the denomination's greatest need. The seminarian replied without hesitation, "Our greatest need is for churches to stay together and for Christians to love one another."

The seminarian echoed the words of John echoing the words of Jesus and that, my friends and fellow Christ followers, is a smart move and an A+ answer.

To God be the glory. Amen.