

What characteristics make a good friend? That may not be a question you've ever considered. Mostly because friendships usually aren't something formulaic or planned in advance. You don't go out looking to make a friend. Looking for specific attributes that will make a good friend for you. You just... become friends.

And yet, there are things that draw us to people. That allow friendships to grow. So what are they? Maybe... common interests and a similar personality. Or maybe it's the differences that make you such a good fit. The complementary nature of your relationship.

Regardless, there are certain characteristics we always want in a friend. Things like loyalty. Trustworthiness. Reliability. Without these kinds of attributes you can't really build a friendship at all. Because these aren't just the building blocks of friendship. These are the building blocks of love.

So it's interesting that, in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus would choose this particular moment to tell his disciples that they are his friends. Because in just a few hours, the disciples will display none of those characteristics. They won't be loyal. They won't be trustworthy. They won't be reliable.

They will betray him to the Jewish authorities. They will deny him three times. They will abandonment him, when they swore they would never fall away. And the man who records this very Gospel account for us, will stand at the foot of the cross and watch his Lord suffer a cruel and painful execution. And do nothing except stand there and comfort his mother.

Jesus chooses this moment to call his disciples his friends. Jesus choose this moment to talk to his disciples about love. Nine times in nine verses, Jesus uses the word "love." When he knows perfectly well that over the next 24 hours his disciples will show him no love at all. And yet, as he always does, Jesus has a reason for choosing this moment to talk about friendship and love. And we need to hear it just as the disciples did.

Because we're not exactly the greatest friends of Jesus either. Look at the commands that Jesus associates with being his disciples. "*Abide in my love.*" Like a child knowing that his parents love him and so remaining obediently in that love, we know that Jesus loves us and we are to remain obediently in that love.

Which connects to the next command: "*Keep my commandments.*" You abide in Jesus' love by doing what he tells you to do. And what does he command you to do? "*Love one another... Go and bear fruit.*" To abide in the love of Jesus is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now tell me, how well do you abide in Jesus' love? Do you stick close beside him, doing everything he commands? Loving your neighbor with the love that Christ showed us and bearing the fruits of faith and the Holy Spirit every day of your lives?

Or, do you sometime flee from Christ, like the disciples fled from him when the soldiers arrested him. Because, like them, you're afraid. Afraid of what you might have to sacrifice to be truly abide in his love. To truly keep his commands. To truly love one another and bear fruit for His Kingdom.

In last Sunday's Gospel lesson, Jesus talked about his relationship with his disciples. He is the vine, you are the branches. The branches cannot exist without being connection to the vine. This week, he continues that analogy, in a way. By asking us to abide in his love, Jesus is really asking us, as branches, how connected are we to the vine? How can we abide in his love if that connection is weak?

It's a hard question to ask ourselves, because we want so desperately to separate our spiritual lives from our normal, daily lives. We want to come to church to abide in the love of Christ every Sunday morning. Basking in God's love for us. And it is most certainly here, waiting for you.

But then, we also want to leave. And put that spiritual life behind us. And forget everything that Christ commanded about how we love our neighbor and how we bear the fruit of the Spirit as we go out in the world. Put ourselves first. Put our priorities first. Put our wants and needs first. We want to abide in the love of Christ for a few hours on Sunday morning. But then we want to abide in the love of ourselves the rest of the week.

How healthy do you think a branch will be if it's only connected to the vine for a few hours every week? How long will that branch stay alive if it's constantly constantly pulling itself away from the vine? Stretching and straining that connection as far as it will go?

Christ wants us abiding in his love all the time. When we're here at church, receiving Word and Sacrament. But even more so when we're out in the world. Keeping his commands, loving our neighbor, and bearing fruit. Because it's out in the world where all of that stuff goes on.

When the disciples gathered around the Last Supper and heard this sermon of Jesus, they were convinced that they could and would abide in Jesus' love. Peter declared confidently, *"Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away... Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you."* They were adamant that they would stick beside Jesus through everything, even death.

But Jesus knew they wouldn't. He told them point blank, "You won't stay beside me. You will abandon me. You will deny me. One of you, sitting with me right now, will betray me to the people who will sentence me to death." He knew the people who were around him. He knew their weaknesses. He knew their selfishness. He knew their sinfulness. And he called them friends anyway.

Jesus knows the people who are in this church today. He knows our weaknesses. He knows our selfishness. He knows our sinfulness. And he calls us friends anyway.

Why? Well, because Jesus' definition of friendship is different than our definition of friendship. His definition of love is different than the world's definition of love. Than our sinful definition of love.

Jesus' definition of friendship is not that we love him, but that he loves us. We call people friends because they are loyal. Because they are trustworthy. Because they are reliable. We call people friends because we consider them worthy of friendship.

Jesus calls us friends because he has forgiven us. Because we are not loyal or trustworthy or reliable. Not in the way that Jesus is loyal and trustworthy and reliable to us. And if that were the criteria for being a friend of Christ, we would utterly fail. But out of his grace and mercy, he forgives our failures. He chooses us as friends, sinful though we are.

He loves us. And the definition of love that Jesus uses is not what the other person can do for you but what you can do for them. *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends."* The divine measure of love is what you sacrifice for someone else. What you sacrifice for someone you call a friend.

Jesus has called us friends. And because he has called us friends, he will sacrifice everything for us. He will lay down his life for us. There is no greater love than the love of Christ for his friends. There is no greater love than the love of Christ for us.

So we are no longer servants, doing what Christ commands because we have to. That's how servants operate. There is no love between a servant and his master. A servant does what his master says because he must. He has no choice. He'll be punished if he doesn't.

No, we are no longer servants. We are friends. Now, that doesn't mean we're complete equals. Christ is still in charge. He's still giving commands. But now, we receive those commands as friends, not as servants. Friends who know that if we fail, we won't immediately fall under our master's wrath.

Rather, we turn to Christ, who has already proven his friendship to us by forgiving our sins, and we repent. We say to him, "As you forgave me when you first called me your friend in Holy Baptism, so forgive me again as your friend this day." And so he forgives again. And again. And again. Because that's what a friend does. A friend sacrifices for a friend. A friend forgives his friends.

Christ has chosen us as his friends, even though we are not loyal, trustworthy, or reliable. He has loved us, even though we have done nothing to deserve his love. He has laid down his life for us. And now he has appointed us to go and bear fruit.

Fruit that, once again, isn't based on our obedience. If bearing fruit were simply up to us, we would fail, just as we fail to abide in his love and keep his commands and love our neighbor. No, he has appointed us to bear fruit. He has empowered us to bear fruit.

You'll notice, Jesus connects this bearing of fruit with prayer. *“That you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”* You see, Jesus knows how terrible we are at bearing good fruit on our own. And so he tells us, “You can't bear fruit on your own. You can't do good works on your own. You can't have all the fruits of the Spirit on your own. Don't try to do it on your own.”

“Ask my Father for help. Ask him for fruit in your life. He will give it to you. He will fill your life with good fruit. He will fill your life with obedience to my commands, and love for your neighbor, and the fruits of the Spirit.”

Repent of your sins. Abide in His love. And pray. That you may be the friend to Jesus that he is to you. That you may love God and love your neighbor in the same way that Jesus loves you. That you may have the fullness of joy that comes from listening to Christ like the fullness of joy that he has in speaking to you. Amen.