

**John 15:9-17**  
Easter 6B + May 6, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
Friends

The Word of the Lord from John 15:13: Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Christ is risen from the dead, and He calls you friends. Not only that, He defines what friendship is, and that's worth a look.

See, I have friends. As of last count, I have over 1124 of them. That's what my Facebook page says. People from all over the world want to be my friend, men and women, older and younger – people that I would never know of and likely will never meet in person. They send me a friend request, and I check out their page; and I usually accept their friendship unless the page was started two hours ago and says something like, "I'm a single Russian woman looking for a man, and I think you might be the one."

My friends are very friendly. They keep inviting me to play games, and I respond warmly by tweaking the filters to prevent them from inviting me to play games. Sometimes, shortly after establishing our friendship, newfound friends from halfway across the world ask me for money, and I politely address this by ignoring them. If they persist, I can always press the "unfriend" button and terminate our friendship, a decision that is so traumatic that I feel it deep in my mouse-clicking finger for nearly half a second.

In other words, Facebook friendship isn't really friendship at all. It's the cheapest of imitations. Oddly enough, despite the rise in social media, the CIGNA corporation just released a survey showing that loneliness has reached epidemic levels in our land, particularly among younger adults. Did I say they're lonely "despite" social media? Maybe it should be "because of."

Good friends, real friends, are hard to find. Oh, you'll have acquaintances and buddies and people you get along with, maybe neighbors that you trust with a house key, but those deep and abiding friendships that endure years in joy and tragedy are rare. Such friendship requires and enjoys a trust that's exceptional in a fallen world. One is greatly blessed to have a handful such friends in a lifetime.

Jesus calls you friends. The almighty, only-begotten Son of God calls you friends.

Before we unpack what He means by that, we should first ask the question: why do you deserve to be called a friend by Jesus? See, more than once in either book or video, I've seen the idea explored of someone who is granted the wish to read the minds of people around them, to know what they're thinking. It never turns out well, and you know why. Minds are full of meanness and envy and lust and all sorts of perverse thoughts: people only appear to be as good as they are because they've learned to keep that all hidden. In part, friendship is made and sustained by what we don't say, what we don't let out. If you and I really knew what each other was thinking all the time, I don't know that we'd be so friendly – even though everyone of us is guilty of the same.

Jesus knows all things, including all your thoughts – even the ones that, if your spouse knew, he or she might think about switching addresses. Not only that, He's sinless and holy – He

has no such sinful thoughts; which means that this friendship is not based on Jesus saying, "Hey, I'm no better than you are." He is far better, far more righteous than you are, as different as day and night.

But He still calls you friends.

Not only that, He's not just a holy man, but the eternal Son of God. Most of the time, what friends you have will be of similar class and status and background to you: rare are the friendships that cross these boundaries. Kings don't mix with peasants, far less enemies whose thoughts are often how best to stab him in the back; and the idea of the Son of God mixing with sinners is far more unbelievable. I could maybe imagine Jesus deigning to call you "servants" or "slaves" or "minions" or "riff-raff." But the holy, sinless, all-knowing, almighty, eternal Son of God calls you friends.

So to the question, "Why do you deserve to be called a friend by Jesus?", the answer is pretty apparent: you don't. This is an unlikely friendship.

But then it gets unlikelier.

Not only do you not deserve it, but you haven't earned it either. Think of the story line where the guy falls for the girl out of his league who won't give him the time of day; but gradually, by his clever wit and kindness and feats of strength, he gets her to give him a look. As saviors go, Jesus is quite out of your league; and what with that sinfulness we've already talked about, you're not going to earn His love. That's what makes this friendship even more unlikely, and even more to be treasured: see, the word for love between friends in Greek implies a 50-50 proposition – I've got your back if you've got mine. Friends have common interests, outlooks and goals. Friends aren't friends if one is betraying the other all the time.

So when Jesus defines friendship with you in our text, He doesn't use the word for 50-50 mutual love. He uses the word *agapé*, or selfless, sacrificial love. And He illustrates the extent and reality of this love with one, simple sentence: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." That's the ultimate in sacrifice and the ultimate in love, isn't it, to say, "I will die so that you can live?" But it's even more sacrificial than that: Romans 5:8 says that, "God shows His love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us."

In other words, Jesus didn't die *because* you were friends. He died to make friends out of enemies. He took all of God's wrath that you deserved for your sin: God used it all up on His beloved Son on the cross. Having laid down His life for you, Jesus has taken it up again. Risen from the dead, despite your ongoing sin, by His grace He calls you friends. The making of His friendship is all His doing, His sacrifice. As He says in our text, you didn't choose Him. He chose you. He chose you to be His friend, a branch to His vine, so that you might bear fruit (since that's just what branches do, remember?); and so that you might receive every good gift from His Father in heaven. And because you are His friend, His Father in heaven is not just your Friend's Father. By Holy Baptism, He is now your Father too.

That's the Gospel that undergirds this friendship. Jesus calls you friends because He laid down His life for you.

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You have a part in this friendship. You were once dead, but now you're alive and a new creation in Christ. Once you were an enemy of God, but now the Father calls you a beloved child and Jesus calls you a friend.

Friendship is never coerced. If I force you to be my friend, it's not a friendship anymore. Thus, although friendship with Jesus means eternal life, He will not force you to be His friend. He gives the gift of friendship and salvation freely, but you can always throw it away if you don't want it – either intentionally or unintentionally. So that you might remain Jesus' friend, He tells you your part in the friendship.

First off, He says, "Abide in My love." Be loved by Jesus. This is beautiful. Rather than starting off your part in the friendship with a long list of requirements, He tells you that this friendship is maintained by His love for you. Be loved by Jesus. The only way you won't be His friend now is if you don't want His love or His friendship.

So that you can be sure what it means to abide in that love and not reject it, He goes on to say, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." Some will read this and say, "Now the other shoe drops! You've got to earn Jesus' ongoing love by your obedience – this friendship does have conditions after all!"

In such a rationale, Jesus is made the bad guy for urging you not to sin and destroy the friendship. Obedience plays a part in friendships. Imagine a husband who says, "I love my wife, and so I'm hoping to keep that relationship while I take other lovers." According to God's Word, one of the benefits of marriage is that by their vows a man and woman pledge to each other a God-pleasing place for love. The husband in our example is hoping that his wife will continue to obey her wedding vows while he disobeys them to be adulterous. In that respect, it's not obedience that makes marriage a marriage (the vows do), but disobedience destroys it. Now, by choosing you and calling you His friend, Jesus has brought you out of sin at the price of His own blood. Your sins are acts of infidelity, unfaithfulness against Him. Your obedience doesn't make the friendship, but your disobedience can destroy it: and when that happens, He's not the bad guy.

And of course, you sin daily and much. You don't obey His Word as you ought. That's why you give thanks that the word "keep," as in "keep My commandments," means more than just "obey." It also means "treasure," "guard," "keep hold of and don't let go."

As obedience plays a part in friendships, love also gives commands. It's not the same as tolerance. Because parents love children, they command them not to touch a hot stove or play in the street. Because God loves you so much that He gave His only-begotten Child for you, He commands you not to sin because those sins will kill you.

So hold onto His commandments. Treasure His Word. That's the means by which you abide in His love. You hear His commandments, and you acknowledge they're true, that right is still right and wrong is still wrong. You seek to obey them, live by them, because that's what friends do to honor friends. When you fail, you confess your sins – because you also keep and treasure His Gospel; and you know that this friendship is not built upon how well you obey, but upon the truth that the Christ laid down His life so that you could be forgiven.

Jesus goes on to say, "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." To love others is to treasure Jesus' commandments with regard to them. Don't kill them, don't commit adultery with or against them, don't steal from them, etc. But more than *not* doing them harm, you're set free from sin to do them good – to love *sacrificially* on their behalf. And as you treasure Jesus' commandments, love for your neighbor means that you speak the truth in love. If, for instance, someone is living a life that is manifestly immoral, love compels you to tell them so. You are not called upon to throw stones, literally or verbally. Instead, in love a

Christian says, "I'm concerned for you because the Bible says that what you're doing earns God's wrath. I don't want you to face God's wrath. I want you to know His forgiveness and His favor, because Jesus has died for your sins. I want you to know Jesus not as a righteous Judge of your sin, but as your friend."

Your part in this friendship with Jesus, then, is to be loved and to love others. Again, you don't love in order to be friends with Jesus: your love is the result of being friends with Jesus. Remember last week, that a branch joined to the vine doesn't have to be told to bear fruit, because bearing fruit is just what a healthy branch does? If you are joined to Christ, receiving His grace and love, then loving others is just what you do.

Abide in Jesus' love, then: treasure His Word, honor His commandments, confess when you sin and cling to His Gospel – His Gospel that He made you His friend by laying down His life for you.

Rejoice always in this truth: Jesus calls you friends. It's the most unlikely friendship ever, for it's established by the sacrificial death of the Son of God to redeem you from sin. But the sacrifice has been made, and Jesus calls you friends. Therefore, love one another as He has loved you; and as He loves you even now. Even now, He serves you. Even now, He enlivens you with His Word and His Supper, His undeserved gifts to you, His friends. Want proof? He declares that you are His friends – not because of who you are or what you've done, but because He's laid down His life for you. At the price of His own blood, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen