

“Stranger or Friend?”

May 10, 2015

6th Sunday of Easter – *Pathway to Discipleship* series

Confirmation Sunday

Am I your friend? It’s a question that’s been asked a lot as we navigate social media . Facebook has changed the way we use the term “friend.” I have 639 Facebook friends, but how much investment does it take on my part? How many of them do I know well? How many are just acquaintances - even more like strangers than friends?

But “friend” means something. Jesus uses “friend” when he speaks to his disciples. Remember when he said “I am the vine; you are the branches?” He explains the dynamics of relationship further. If you didn’t notice, the word “love” appears in some form nine times in these verses! Love is to be the way of life for Jesus’ followers. Wherever we are on our journey with Christ, love is the greatest commandment.

The video helps us to remember the power of love. We do carry labels - some of them placed on us by others, some of them we put on ourselves. And yes, we might even stand convicted by what we saw - because sometimes we’re the ones who throw labels around. But how powerful to remember that we are loved - unconditionally, deeply, widely, fully, completely, totally loved by God who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Feel free to put on your LOVED label if you haven’t yet.

Jesus asks his disciples to make a commitment to love. To continue to love. To make a firm decision to love. To keep on loving. And then he calls them friends because he has shared his mission with them. He came to love, and asks them to love. Can we call ourselves friends of Jesus?

As I’ve met with Keegan, Connor, and Grace to prepare for confirmation, that’s been a helpful question. Do I want to be a friend of Jesus? But even if we say “yes,” there’s the challenge to love as God loves.

Confirmation is a time that these three confirm the faith that was lifted up at their baptism, but it’s a challenging moment in their spiritual journeys and in our life as the church. They publicly profess their commitment to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. Is he someone whom we just want to know remotely - kind of an acquaintance - or do we want to be his friend?

Some people argue that we’ve become “buddy-buddy” with God. Rather than being our Creator, some say that God has been reduced to someone we rely on once in a while, someone we call when we need something desperately. But Jesus’ use of “friend” with the disciples calls us to commitment.

Jesus doesn't use "servant." Consider the meaning of "servant." Usually, a servant is under another's control. A servant acts because they have to – not because they want to. There isn't a sense of commitment. But consider your role as a friend. We act with concern for someone else. We do things without a thought of receiving anything in return. We go the extra mile to show our love as a friend.

How strange for the disciples! Jesus was their Teacher; they were his students. But he goes against that model and invites them to be his friends. Friends share confidences. Jesus keeps no secrets when it comes to living out our faith. Friends are those who are loved. Jesus is clear that our friendship isn't based on how good we are, but on his love for us. Jesus doesn't call his disciples friends as a way to give power or privilege, but rather to call us to sacrifice, care, and serve.

It's no small thing for any of us, whatever age we are, to stand before God and our church family and profess our faith. And this moment isn't something that Keegan, Connor, and Grace come to without careful thought, discussion, and questions. It's a means of grace and a mark of transformation – a step in the spiritual journey. And their profession challenges all of us to remember who we are and what we stand for - in whom we place our trust and our hope. What do we believe?

So when you consider Jesus' command to love, are you a servant or a friend? Do we act on his command to love as something we have to do, once in a while when we feel like it? Or do we accept his love and love others as an act of commitment?

[We may think of our faith as something we have chosen, but Jesus reminds us that through him, God invites us to believe in love's power and to grow in faith. Sometimes God's invitation is an intrusion or disruption, something we didn't expect, but God reaches out. By calling his disciples his friends, Jesus calls them to community. We're called to be a community of Jesus' friends who live out the command to love.]

Friendship with Jesus means that we're obedient to God's commandments – the call to love God and love each other. Friendship with Jesus means that we bear good fruit – fruit that lasts! It's when we are friends of Jesus – when we love, when we bear good fruit – that others take notice and want to get connected to Jesus, too. Someone said, "We should try to be so closely united to our Lord that we reproduce his life in our own, that our thoughts, words, and actions should proclaim his teaching, so that he reigns in us, lives in us."

All too often, you and I, representatives of Jesus, don't represent him well. I cringe when I see people screaming judgments against others in the name of Jesus Christ. It's easy for me to get self-righteous – *at least I'm not doing that*. But we all fail to show and tell how much Jesus loves everyone and wants a relationship with them.

It's not just extreme Christians on the news who give Christianity a bad name. In fact, most people don't base their opinions about the church on extreme folks. More often, it's personal. You and I lack compassion. We have quick tempers. We forget about self-control. We use words that are unkind and profane. We get puffed up with pride. When that happens, we aren't the friends that Jesus calls us to be.

Jesus reminds us that being his friends puts us on equal footing. The Body of Christ has no hierarchy. Each of us is important and vital to the church. Our gifts are needed. Our voices are important. We are Jesus' friends not because we are special in some certain way, but because we do what he calls us to do with willingness and joy.

Being with Keegan, Connor, and Grace in confirmation class has been a great joy for me, but also a great challenge - in a good way. Many of you have watched them grow up. They are bright, compassionate, and kind. They have struggled with faith issues of war and peace, sin and forgiveness. They have asked many challenging questions about how we live in the world. They are like the rest of us. We've had times when we laughed together, but we've also had serious conversations about how our faith is lived out in the world. We had a wonderful discussion about the Prodigal Son - and how God's love goes so far for us.

Confirmation isn't about having it all figured out. In fact, I think it's just the opposite. It's a commitment to keep on trying to grow in faith as a part of the bigger family of God. Just like we need to be connected to Jesus to bear fruit, we need to be connected to each other. Today you respond to God's grace in your life, for yourself. You make a personal commitment to live as a Christian, and we the congregation pledge our support.

Confirmation is a reminder that Jesus' call for us to follow is demanding. Jesus doesn't promise an easy life free of struggle or painful growth, but a life connected to him that bears fruit when we abide in his love and share it. So are we bearing fruit? To witness others accept the call to follow Jesus and to reaffirm it for ourselves means that we ask the question: do our lives embody what Jesus is talking about? Are we his friends?

Those who follow Jesus Christ are defined by one marker, which is love. Love isn't something we know how to do; it's something God teaches us through others. God is the source of love. Love is an action verb because of what God does in Jesus Christ.

It's been said, "Christians are made, not born." We are formed into Christians throughout our whole lives through the love of Jesus Christ. As we celebrate Mother's Day, we are thankful for those women - mothers or not - who have nurtured us in faith.

But also we are formed into Christians by those in our church family. Friends, we celebrate today because God has worked in this congregation to bring people to faith in

Jesus Christ. Keegan, Connor, and Grace have grown up among us. They have learned from their parents, grandparents, and loved ones. They have been encouraged by us in worship, Sunday School, and Youth Group. Praise God!

The challenge of Jesus is still before us. For these three, today is one step in a life of seeking and serving God. You and I are on that journey with God, too. We have to be connected to Jesus Christ, and we have to be connected to each other. We have to live love. There are people we know who need a safe place to connect with Jesus Christ. There are people we know who need to learn and grow in faith.

I pray that we reaffirm our faith in Christ today. I pray that we look at our journeys and see where we are, celebrate what's good, and see what we can do better. We proclaim our faith here, but the work isn't over. Being faithful means always learning what it means to be a friend of Jesus - not one whom we connect to remotely, but one whom we connect to intimately.

May we be friends of Jesus. Thanks be to God. AMEN!