

***Jesus Uncensored Sermon Series:***  
**“JESUS THE FRIEND”**

**John 15:12-17 – Fourth Sunday of Lent**

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Homewood, AL – March 2, 2008**

**John 15:12-17:** "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you 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. This I command you, to love one another.

Last week, I was cleaning out an old trunk at home when I came across the address book from my year at the Divinity School at the University of Edinburgh. As I flipped through the pages in the book, reading the names, pictures of faces began to take shape in my head. I did not remember all of the names, by any means, but there were a dozen or so who jumped out at me: my roommate from Germany, an American with whom I became friends from Indiana, another from Switzerland, another from Greece. It has been more than 30 years since I have seen any of these people from university, but conversations we had, experiences we shared, are still fresh in my mind. I am looking forward to tracking down some of these Edinburgh friends on the Internet and renewing those ties.

If the truth be told, I can't remember the title of a single book I read while studying there. I am not discounting what I learned in the formal setting of lecture and readings, but what I most remember about those days, were the friendships. I learned as much, if not more, from the *ménage* of friends from around the world, as I did sitting in the lecture hall.

One of the criticisms made of Jesus is that he left behind no written accounts. He didn't write a book that made it to the top-ten best-seller list. For some, this is proof that most of what is claimed about Jesus is simply a myth and not to be trusted.

And, I suppose, if we were to set out to begin a new religion, we would leave behind a book to communicate the message. That way, there would be no questions, it would be right there in black and white. Muhammad left the Koran. Joseph Smith, left the Book of Mormon. But Jesus himself, never put pen to paper, as far as we know. He never wrote a *Magnus Opus* of his teaching, not even a pamphlet of ten helpful rules for living.

So what did he do? He accumulated friends, and let them talk about him, write about him. I think Donald Miller, in his book, *Searching for God Knows What*, is right on target in saying that the Gospels reveal a Christ who ate with people, attended parties, prayed with people, traveled with people and worked with people. Evidently, Jesus liked people and cared for them. "Jesus built our faith system entirely on relationships, forgoing marketing and spin."

We have talked about Jesus as a teacher, and Jesus as a healer, but perhaps most telling

about who Jesus was, is found in the word “friend.” In what are called the farewell discourses in John’s Gospel, Jesus makes this explicit: “No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends.” Christian faith is not first of all a set of ethical codes to follow. It is not a philosophy about life. We are not even a religion of the Book in the same way that Islam and Judaism are. At the center of Christian faith is a relationship with God through Christ! A relationship that has all the qualities of a friendship.

In another of his books, Miller talks about how he came to faith in Jesus. He had grown up in the church but rejected that part of his life. But somebody suggested that he read through the Bible with fresh eyes. He started with the Gospel of Matthew, and then read through Mark, Luke and John, in about a week. He found Jesus very confusing, didn’t know if he liked him very much, and was tired of reading by the end of the second day. But by the time he got to the end of Luke, to the part where they were going to kill Jesus, something shifted in him, Miller said. “I can remember it was cold outside, crisp.... And I remember sitting at my desk, and I don’t know what it was that I read, or what Jesus was doing in the book, but I felt a love for him rush through me – through my back and into my chest. I remember thinking that I would follow Jesus anywhere. It didn’t matter what he asked me to do.”

The biggest step we can take in our faith journey, is when the words on the page become transparent, and we fall in love with the One about whom the words are talking. We fall in love with Jesus. He moves from being more than a teacher, more than a figure from history. He becomes our friend. Faith becomes, not just some intellectual assent to doctrines, but it becomes a living relationship with the person of Jesus – relationship that nurtures us, sustains us, challenges us, and in the end, transforms us.

When we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus, there is much to be learned from his teaching. Parables like the lost sheep and prodigal son have much to teach us about this God we meet in Jesus. But perhaps as important as his teachings, are the stories of his interaction with people. Those interactions have as much to tell us about the Jesus and the character of God as do his teachings.

Right off the bat, the very notion that Jesus uses the word “friends” in referring to his followers is startling. When the Old Testament talks about God, it uses words like “just,” “holy,” “almighty.” The proper relationship to this God was one of servant to master. God was to be obeyed more than loved. He was more distant than close. That changes. “No longer do I call you servants, I call you friends.” Instead of being over against us, God stands beside us and is with us as one who cares. Our relationship to God is everything that the word “friend” conveys. It is a relationship based upon loyalty.

Walter Winchell wrote that, “A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out. It is those people who stand beside us, when life turns against us – that are worthy of the title of friend.”

The disciples of Jesus were hard to be friends with. They were always getting it wrong. James and John argued about who would get to sit next to Jesus in the Kingdom. Peter, bless his heart, promised to follow him to the end. But when the end came, he was nowhere to be found. And Judas – this enigmatic man whom Jesus had called to be in his inner circle – sold Jesus out. He led the swat team sent to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. “The one I will kiss, is the

man; arrest him.” Judas had gone from being a friend of Jesus, to a traitor.

The recent movie *Atonement* has a similar scene. Britony, a young 13-year-old girl, sees something she misunderstands, tells a lie and destroys all possibility of happiness in three lives, including her own. The story takes place in England before the Second World War. Robbie is the son of the housekeeper who is in love with Cecilia, Britony’s older sister. Their love is mutual. The lie Britony tells sends Robbie to prison. Robbie and Cecilia are separated. When the war breaks out, Robbie is given the chance to leave prison by entering the Army and fighting in France. Home on leave, he reconnects with Cecilia. Britony shows up at Cecilia’s apartment wanting to right the wrong she has done. In a tense encounter, Britony confesses the harm she has done, the hurt she has caused by her betrayal, and offers to tell the truth, to attempt to make it right. Robbie, with anger in his voice, tells her just to write it down, tell the truth, and “then leave us be.”

And we understand his anger. We understand his wish to cut all ties with this girl who had betrayed him. And so, we would understand if Jesus turned his back on Judas, or called him what he was – a traitor. But *listen* to how Jesus greets him after the kiss of betrayal, “Friend, do what you have come to do.” Friend! Imagine calling Judas that – then, in that place, at that moment, in those circumstances. In the face of disloyalty and betrayal, Jesus still calls Judas *friend*.

And by extension, he is speaking to all of us. The truth is that all of us have stood where Judas stood – betraying the best we know, selling ourselves and others short. We are fickle in our loyalties. But our disloyalty *does not* determine Jesus’ loyalty to us! Our faithlessness does not alter his faithfulness. No matter who we are, what we have done – or not done – Jesus still calls us, “Friend.” We can even deny him, desert him, sell him out, refuse to call him friend, be worthy only of the name Judas, and still, he calls us “Friend.” It is Jesus’ loyalty to us that makes it possible for us to call *him* friend.

A friend is also someone who believes in us – sometimes more than we believe in ourselves. It is someone who helps us to see the best in ourselves, and calls forth that best.

Simon Peter seemed a very unlikely candidate to become chief among the apostles of Jesus. This impetuous, short-tempered fisherman was always getting it wrong. He is the one who promised to follow Jesus to the end, only to desert and deny him. But remember what Jesus called Simon when he called him to follow him: “From now on you will be called Peter – Petras – which means rock. Upon you, on this rock, I will build my church.” Imagine calling Simon, “the Rock.” But that’s what he became because of his friendship with Jesus. Jesus helped him to see more and become more than he saw or would have become in himself.

Most of us first heard of the contemporary African-American poet Maya Angelou when she read a poem at the inauguration of President Clinton. In an interview in *Smithsonian* magazine, Angelou talked about being abused by her mother’s boyfriend when she was only eight years old. She spoke of having to heal from that terrible episode, but also about how she told on him, sending him to prison. When he got out, he was attacked and beaten to death by men in the community. Maya felt responsible for his death.

After this she did not speak a word for years. She retreated into herself. It was only much later, when she was walking with her mother one day, that she would find the strength that would

free her and release her creativity. Walking down a street near their home, Maya Angelou said her mother stopped, turned, and spoke to her: “Baby,” she said, looking her in the eye. “You know something? I think you are the greatest woman I have ever known. Yes. Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, my mother and you...and you...are the greatest.” Angelou said that she boarded a street car with tears flowing down her face, stared into the wood paneling of the car and thought, “Suppose, I really am somebody.” And she *was* somebody. Far from the girl who spent years living in fear and silence, she became an articulate and brilliant poet who stood before the whole nation.

Jesus was like Angelou’s mother. He went around looking people in the eye, telling them they were somebody. They were beautiful. No matter what the world says, you *are* somebody.

In John’s account of Jesus’ ministry, he said, “I am the one Jesus loved.” All of us can say that! Donald Miller reminds us that the heart of Jesus’ ministry was to display the worth of *all* humanity. To call Jesus friend, is to always have someone who believes in us. And helps us see more than we can see in ourselves at times. (*Searching for God*, Donald Miller) And, who will also challenge us to be more.

There is that series of ads which says, “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk.” All of us need friends who care enough about us to challenge us to do good things we might not otherwise do – or, to stop us from doing things that are harmful. And then as part of friendship, Jesus challenges us to become more – to be *all* that we can be.

Several years ago, I had a frozen shoulder that required physical therapy over a course of weeks. The therapy involved stretching and pulling, and it was painful but necessary. When I would get to that point in the therapy when I would want to ease off or quit, the therapist would tell me, “Just a little bit further, a little longer.” He would challenge me, push me to stretch just a bit further. And sure enough, the shoulder got better. I would have never been able to do it by myself. Without the therapist pushing me, challenging me, I would have remained impaired.

Jesus always meets us where we are, and love us as we are, but his love for us does not leave us *as* we are. His friendship will stretch us, challenge us, change us, free us, so that we no longer live impaired. Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The steady discipline of intimate friendship with Jesus results in people becoming like him.”

When I was thirteen years old, I fell in love with Jesus – when I realized he loved me first and always. That began a relationship in which Jesus has been my teacher, my healer, my Lord, my Savior. But most important...my friend. Someone who has been loyal. Someone who has helped me to see the best in myself. And then...challenge me to become the best.

“No longer do I call you servant, I have called you friends.”