

“Friends of Jesus”

Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable of two portrait artists. The first artist travels the world over looking for a face worth painting, but never finds it. The second artist stays home and paints his friends, finding something beautiful in every face, in spite of their faults. Kierkegaard then draws a parallel between his story and the definition of love. He writes: *Would it not be sad if art, instead of making life beautiful for us, only fastidiously discovers that none of us is beautiful. Would it not be sadder still ... if love also could only make it evident that none of us is worth loving, instead of love's being recognized precisely by its loving enough to be able to find some lovable-ness in all of us, consequently loving enough to be able to love all of us.*

The joy in today's Gospel lesson is that Christ turns out to be the second artist, loving our flawed faces as completely as the Father loves the perfect face of the Son. The measure of that love is that it is without measure, reaching even as far as self-sacrifice. The Father's love does not stop with the Son, but extends to us through the Son. “For the Father also endures the pain of the cross, and is the Gardener who perfects the branches who remain in the Vine, making us lovable as it were. Our discipleship, therefore, glorifies the Father.”

But what does it mean to be a disciple ... a disciple who is loved and who is to love? The core message of today's lessons from I John and the Gospel of John is based on the fact that Jesus says that his disciples have not chosen him, but he has chosen them. It is not we who chose God, but God who in His grace approaches us with a call and an offer made out of His love. Three things can be said about discipleship in terms of our calling to faith. First, Jesus calls us to be his friend. Jesus tells us that he does not call us “slaves” any more. He calls us friends.

The audience, who first heard Jesus say this, would have been utterly surprised. You see in Jesus' time “slave or servant of God” was not a title of shame. It was a title of the highest honor. Moses was the slave/servant of God ... so was Joshua ... and so was David. The Greek word for slave/servant is *doulos*. Paul counted it an honor to be called a “doulos,”... a slave/servant of God ... and so did James. The greatest followers of God were proud to be called the slaves of God. Keeping this in mind, Jesus says, “I have something greater for you yet. You are no longer “douloi.” You are my friends. Jesus Christ offers to us an *intimacy* with God that not even the greatest of followers knew before he came into the world.

At the time Jesus uttered the words, “You are my friends,” there was another custom with which the audience would have been familiar. In the courts of the Roman Emperors and of the Eastern Kings, there was a select group of people called the friends of the king, or friends of the Emperor. At all times, these friends of the king had direct access to the king. They had even the right to come into his bedchamber at the beginning of the day. The king talked to these friends of the court before he talked to his generals, his rulers, and his statesmen. The friends of the king were those who had the closest and the most intimate connection with him.

Keeping this context in mind, just think what it must have felt like to hear Jesus say: “You are no longer slaves/servants, but you are friends.” To believe in and to follow Jesus Christ means we are “friends of the King” ... we are as near as one can get to God. Jesus calls us to be his friends and the friends of God. This is a tremendous offer. It means that no longer do we need to gaze longingly at God from far off. We are not like slaves who have no right whatsoever to enter into the presence of the master. We are not like a crowd whose only glimpse of the king is in the passing on some state occasion. No! Jesus gives us this intimacy with God so that God is no longer a distant stranger, but our close friend.

“You're my best friend.” These four words are ordinary enough. However, when they are spoken by one who is perceived as master to another, who has taken the role of a servant, these words are no longer ordinary, but extraordinary. “You're my best friend” were the four simple words spoken by Miss Daisy to her chauffeur Hoke, bringing a powerful and emotional close to the movie *Driving Miss Daisy*. Miss Daisy is an aging aristocrat who, as the movie begins, is becoming a significant road hazard due to her deteriorating driving skills. Her well-meaning son hires Hoke as her driver, and demands that she stay out from behind the wheel herself. Miss Daisy is not about to take this step, which she perceives as a move toward old-age incompetence.

First she defiantly begins to walk places while Hoke drives alongside in the car. But his persistence prevails, and

soon she is in the back seat being chauffeur-driven. For as widely separated as they are on the socio-economic scale, Miss Daisy and Hoke have much in common --- their experience of discrimination (Miss Daisy is a Jew and Hoke is an Afro-American) ... their increasing ages ... and their memories of what once was. Miss Daisy and Hoke maintain the pretense of a servant/master relationship for the sake of those around them, but after years of life together they have become deeply devoted friends. The movie closes with a moment of touching humor. Miss Daisy is in a nursing home, very close to the end of her life. Her son brings Hoke to visit. In his domineering fashion, the son attempts to control the conversation with meaningless little pleasantries. Finally, in quiet desperation to renew her priceless friendship, Miss Daisy exclaims: "Shut-up! Hoke came to see me, not to listen to you talk!"

Jesus said, "No longer do I call you servants ... but I have called you friends." With these words Jesus invokes a radical new spiritual order that closes the chasm between God and humankind. He invites us into the full communion and the fellowship of friendship, and leaves this as our example for relationships with others. It is an extraordinary thing this promotion from servant hood to friendship --- even revolutionary. For in this fellowship we discover the grace and friendship of God, as well as a new freedom in our relationship with others. However, this new fellowship ... this friendship with God clearly goes against the grain of our culture, as Miss Daisy and Hoke discovered in their relationship.

By calling us his friends, Jesus challenges us to ask ourselves: When have I called my sister or brother ... spouse or child ... co-worker or employee --- servant, instead of friend? How might I overcome my insecurity that leads to my need to be in control? How can I set others free to be the best they can be for the sake of the kingdom? How do I celebrate my friendship with God through Christ? As one author writes, "It would be an excellent self-discipline if all those who sing, 'What a friend we have in Jesus,' would ask themselves, 'What kind of a friend does Jesus have in me?'"

I said earlier that three things can be said about discipleship in terms of our calling to faith. The first is that Jesus calls us to be his friend ... that we are brought close and made intimate with God by means of Jesus. Second, because we are brought close to God, by God's grace, we are chosen for joy. This may come as a shock to some of you, but as Jesus' friends, we have the gift of joy ... our faith blesses us with a wealth of joy. However hard the Christian way is, it is --- both in the journey and in the goal --- the way of true joy. For there is always joy in doing the right thing.

The Christian is a person of joy, the laughing cavalier of Christ. One of my most favorite Christmas cards I ever received was a picture of Jesus on the cover, laughing exuberantly, and inside the card read, "Have a joyous holiday!" A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with long faces. It is true that Christians are made aware that they are sinners, but they are redeemed sinners ... and therein lies the joy! How can we fail to be happy when we walk the ways of life with Jesus?

Called to be Jesus' friends ... chosen for joy ... and thirdly, we are chosen for love. We are sent out into the world to love one another. Sometimes we live as if we were sent into the world to compete with one another ... or to dispute with one another ... or to quarrel with one another. But we who believe are to live in such a way that we show what is meant by loving the other. It is here that Jesus makes another of his claims on us. If we ask him: What right have you to demand that we love one another? His answer is this: "No one can show greater love than to lay down their life for their friends --- and I did that!" Some people tell others, "You should love one another," and then turn around and demonstrate with their own life that they do not know themselves the meaning of love.

Jesus has the right to command us to love one another, because he himself first fulfilled that commandment. I will admit that love can not be mandated or be available on demand. We cannot love someone, because someone else tells us to love them. However, consider that Jesus invites you and me to an abiding love of him ... a love that is committed. The sign of fidelity is the same as in all friendships: taking seriously what the friend takes seriously. The mutual love of disciples is Jesus' love for them even to death. From Jesus we take our cue. We are to emulate Jesus. We are to step into the role of the second artist. We are to see in the faces of all what God sees in everyone's face: a person who is loveable ... a person to be loved ... a child of God ... And if we dare to look at others in this manner, we will come to love them, because in the faces of others, we will see ourselves in need of love ... in need of the assurance that we are loveable ... in need of a friend.

Friendship! Joy! Love! What a friend you have in Jesus! However, the question of discipleship remains for you to answer with your own life: "What kind of friend does Jesus have in you?" **Amen.**