

Michael J. Mathey
Easter VI
May 5, 2024
Text: John 15:9 – 17
Title: Best Friends Forever?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Think about a person from your past that you would call your best friend. Are you still in contact with that best friend in your life today? Do you hear from them once in a while like in an annual Christmas card, or are you in much more regular contact with them?

It seems that as we grow older, those best friends who were so important to us for a time begin to drift away. Their lives begin to get more complicated and so do yours, and before you know it, those best friends just aren't around as much as they used to be. Even with all of the modern technological ways that we have to keep in touch with people today, it's just not that easy to keep a close friend, close, unless you're actually seeing them face to face on a regular basis. That's probably one of the reasons that most adults consider their spouse as their best friend, because it's so hard to keep in contact with anyone else.

But in spite of how hard it is to maintain a relationship with a close friend, it's still something that most people desire. We're not meant to be alone all of the time. We are social beings, and we all crave companionship in some form. That's why there are so many classic stories that revolve around friendships. I'm sure that if we took the time we could come up with a pretty extensive list of your favorite stories that celebrate friendship like *It's a Wonderful Life* that ends with the classic reminder from the angel, Clarence, to "Remember, no man is a failure who has friends!"

Even when you look in the Bible, you find descriptions of close friendships in the lives of God's saints. The account of King David's life includes one such example. Before he was able

to claim the throne of Israel or even Judah, David served in the house of his predecessor, King Saul. While he lived and served there, David developed a friendship with the crown prince, Jonathan that was so close that the two men could have been brothers. The proof of their closeness comes through in the love and respect that Jonathan showed to David when Saul wanted to kill him and ordered Jonathan to do the same. David was Jonathan's chief rival for the throne of Israel, he had every reason to kill David, but he helped David to escape from his father's sword because David was such a good friend to him.

Another close friendship is seen between the prophet Elijah and his chosen successor and assistant, Elisha. When Elijah was hiding in a cave in the wilderness, God came to him in a "whisper" and assured him that he was not the only person in Israel who remained faithful to the Lord like he believed he was. God sent Elijah to call Elisha to be his companion and assistant, and the two great prophets became friends in the course of their work as well. In fact, when Elijah was taken up into heaven, Elisha was right there with him trying to see him as long as he possibly could.

As a final example, even Jesus had what we might call best friends from among His group of twelve apostles. Peter, James and John were the inner circle of the apostles, and even though they were technically servants, they could have been considered friends. They were the only ones who were witnesses of the Transfiguration. And throughout his Gospel account the apostle John always refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," leaving it obvious that he was closer to Jesus. So close, in fact, that as Jesus is dying on the cross He charges John with watching over His mother, Mary, even though she has other children of her own.

Before Jesus is arrested and crucified though, He gives some final words to the eleven remaining apostles after Judas leaves the Last Supper to bring the mob to the Garden of

Gethsemane. Today's Gospel reading is taken from those final instructions after the meal is over. During this part of chapter 15, after Jesus has told the apostles that He is the vine and they are the branches, He tells them and us in verses 14 and 15 that, "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."

Before He is arrested, Jesus makes it clear to the apostles that their relationship with Him is changing for them all. There will no longer be a relationship of master and servant with any of them. Now, He is calling all of them His friends because He is telling them everything that will happen to Him and everything that He is going to do. He is treating them like friends and not servants. But they don't listen to Him. These men show themselves to be pretty poor friends indeed, especially when you consider them against these words from verse 13, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends."

Jesus has called the eleven remaining apostles His friends. He has led them, taught them and told them His plans. He is about to lay down His life for them, and each one of them has pledged to follow Him wherever He goes, and even to die themselves rather than deny and abandon Him. But when these so-called "friends" of Jesus are truly put to the test, they fail it miserably. They run away, and, in the case of Peter, deny with an oath that they even know Him. Pretty pathetic friends, aren't they?

We don't measure up any better. Yes, since we have also been told by Jesus what to expect we are also numbered among His friends, but we fail miserably in doing what He commands us to do. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Do we love each other as Christ loves us? Are we even capable of loving that

much? Not by any stretch of the imagination. On any given day we easily love ourselves more than we love Jesus.

We are guilty of this any day of the week, but Sundays show us some of the best examples of our sinful failings when it comes to loving ourselves more than Jesus. You have the option of being here a little longer to learn more about Jesus and His Word in Bible Study, but you choose not participate. When we arrive for worship, we spend more time thinking about how long the sermon will be, whether or not we'll sing a favorite hymn, or where we'll be going for breakfast afterwards instead of focusing on the Word of God that He is freely offering us to feed our faith. Finally, the people sitting around you in these pews are supposed to be people that you love as Christ loved you, but how well do you know each other? Do you know all of the people sitting in the sanctuary with you today beyond just their name? Take a look around you and see if there's anyone here that you are supposed to love as Christ loved you but who you don't know. How good of a friend are you to Jesus if you do not love one another?

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” We sinners don't love many people beyond our own families in this world, and even the love that is supposed to be within a family is questionable at times. It's not unusual to find a news story of a mother or father abusing the children that they're supposed to care for and love. If people have a hard enough time loving their own family members, how frequently do you think it happens that two friends have a relationship that is strong enough to have one being willing to give up his life for the other? Not a very common occurrence, I'm sure.

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” It's impossible for us to be that way with everyone who we are supposed to love since everyone is our neighbor. It's impossible for us, but it wasn't for Jesus.

Think about those words, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” Jesus not only had the greatest love that He is describing here when He laid down His life for His friends, but He had a love that went much farther because His sacrifice was for everyone whether they are His friends or not. As Jesus hung on that cross, He looked at the Roman soldiers who had driven the nails into His hands and feet; and He looked at the chief priests and the leaders of the nation who had condemned Him; and He looked at the apostles who had abandoned Him; and He loved them. He loved them enough to carry out His sacrificial death by torture, and He loved them enough to say those incredible words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Jesus may have said that, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” But He loved the world so much that He laid down His life not only for His friends, but for His enemies also. And when you think about how often you and I sin and fail to keep His commandments, then that is truly Good News for us because it means that He laid down His life for each and every one of us.

If you have a best friend in your life today, then give thanks to God for the blessing that that person is to you. But know that no matter how much that person means to you, Jesus will be a far better friend than anyone else. His love and friendship are without comparison. There is no one who has ever sacrificed more for people who deserved it less, and He did it because of His Father’s perfect and holy will. Jesus has called you His friend, and He has given you the ultimate gift of everlasting life by His own sacrifice of laying down His own life and then taking it up again when He rose from grave to defeat death forever. Alleluia! Amen.