

Friends in Joy, Love, and Sorrow (OR Wondering about Mother and Daughter Friendships) John 15:12-17 and Acts 10:44-48

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on May 9, 2021

At some point in high school, my daughter noticed that a lot of people described their moms as their best friend. (A relevant aside, I always ask my kids before they show up in a sermon.) Somewhere in that chat about moms being best friends, she and I talked about our own relationship and whether we would describe it that way. I don't remember the details, but we both remember me saying something like, "You have a lot of friends, but you only have one Mom, it's important to me that I'm your Mom more than your friend." The topic came up again recently as she wraps up college. She asked if I thought my answer about our friendship was different now.

My conversation with my daughter is timely as Mother's Day converges with Jesus' speech to his disciples about being friends with him. Friendship back in Jesus' day meant something specific. Friendship in the First Century meant direct speak and bold action absent of flattery or distracting social tics. Ultimate friendship also included a noble death on behalf of the friend in both classical and popular philosophy back in Jesus' day. John's readers would have understood this definition of ultimate friendship. When Jesus talked about the greatest love exemplified in the one who would lay down one's life for one's friend, he was naming a widely accepted moral claim.

Curiously, Jesus is not referred to as "friend" in the Gospel of John.¹ He alternately refers to himself as the Son of Man, the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, AND the vine. He doesn't say, "I AM the friend." And his disciples don't call him friend. He names the disciples as his friends when they love each other as he loves them. He defines the greatest love as being willing to lay down one's life down for a friend. And then he walks the bold talk all the way to the cross. He

¹ Gail R. O'Day, Professor of New Testament, Candler School of Theology. "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John." April 1, 2004. https://www.richardmburgess.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/jn_15_ODay_-_Jesus_as_friend_in_the_gospel_of_John.124193245.pdf

launched the disciples into friendship modeled on his own friendship with them. Which brings us to Jesus' friend Peter in the Acts reading today.

Taking place well after the crucifixion and resurrection, this short reading is a fragment of the longer Cornelius' story, the Italian centurion. Read his full story in Acts 10 and 11 this week. He was a Gentile, a non-Jew, who was a God-fearer associated with a Jewish synagogue.² Cornelius invited Jesus' friend Peter to come and teach at his home in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea.³ This means that Cornelius and his household weren't just Gentiles, they were really, really Gentiles.⁴ And he had invited his friends and relatives to listen to Peter's teaching so there were A LOT of Gentiles there. According to Jewish custom, eating with Gentiles was prohibited.⁵ There are visions and prayers and angels in the longer story that clarify the contradictions. Suffice it to say that Peter was divinely directed to this party.

It was a party thrown in Peter's honor and, like any good preacher, he didn't waste his opportunity to say a few words. He preached about Jesus' ministry, his death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins. "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone listening..." The story says that the circumcised believers who had come to Caesarea with Peter "were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." It was a wild moment. They couldn't believe their eyes, nor could they have foreseen that this was where friendship with Jesus was taking them. Except that wasn't true for everyone. Peter, yes, the same Peter who bumbled his way through many a Gospel story before Jesus' death, seems to have finally caught up with Jesus' agenda. Peter's question about withholding baptismal water from the Gentiles was rhetorical. Of course, the baptisms would happen. But that's not where the trouble brewed anyway. It's what happened after the baptisms that got

² Lutheran Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version. Acts 10:1-2, study note. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 1813.

³ Jerusha Matsen Neal, Asst. Professor of Homiletics, Duke Divinity School, North Carolina. Commentary on Acts 10:44-48 for May 9, 2021. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-acts-1044-48>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lutheran Study Bible, 1814.

everyone's knickers in a knot. It's that last quiet verse in our reading as chapter ten ends. "Then they invited [Peter] to stay for several days."

If we keep reading just a few verses into Chapter 11, we get to the crux of the matter. Peter went up to Jerusalem and was criticized by the Jesus' followers there – not for baptizing the Gentiles, but for going to the Gentiles and eating with them. Hospitality moved in both directions at different parts of the story. Early on, Peter invited Cornelius' messengers in and gave them lodging. In our verses today, Cornelius and friends invited Peter to stay for several days. Peter was the kind of friend to Cornelius that Jesus encouraged the disciples to be – walking the talk and boldly widening the circle despite what other people assumed were the natural limits of the circle.

I did answer my daughter's question, by the way. When she asked if my answer about our friendship was different now than it was in high school. I said, "yes," that as she's moved into adulthood, it's become more mutual. Though the truth remains that I'm still her mother. There's simultaneous mutuality and hierarchy. Before anyone gets antsy, I'm in no way saying that my relationship with my daughter is like Jesus' friendship with the disciples. I am definitely NOT like Jesus and she would be the first to tell you that she is NOT my disciple. But there is a parallel, albeit limited, in my mother/daughter example that helps us get at the simultaneous hierarchy of Jesus as the Messiah AND the mutuality of Jesus as our friend.

Man, I would love to have been in those original conversations with Jesus and his disciples - to see him boldly walk the talk, to hear his instructions firsthand, to wonder about his teachings with the other disciples who were just as lost in his ministry as I was, to hear him call me friend. Not to sentimentalize it, just to capture what those moments might have been like. Imagine that with me. There are moments in various conversations with you all that are hints of what that experience must have been like. The church is, after all, the body of Christ. We are Easter people who support, encourage, and pray for each other when it's neither easy nor convenient. We hold each other in faith when one of us struggles to get comfortable with doubt. We work together with neighbors on problems in the community hoping that we're on the right track. In our various ways, we lay

down our lives because Jesus first loved us as friends and continues to love us still.

The mutuality of friendship is a wonder, located in the middle of Jesus' farewell to his friends.⁶ Made all the more poignant because he's shared his final meal with them, he's suffered the betrayal of Judas, and he's anticipating Peter's denial. In the midst of sorrow, his command to love, woven with his friendship, is the foundation of joy. Jesus infuses the mutuality with joy in the sorrow of saying goodbye. He said to his friends, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Love and joy are complete in us through the friend we have in Jesus, and through the friendship by which he widens the circle of his love and binds us together in his name.

⁶ John 13-15 is considered Jesus' Farewell Discourse before his prayer in Chapter 17 and his trial, torture, and crucifixion.