

“Jesus Our Friend”

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3-29-20

Based upon John 11:1-45

Throughout Lent this year, I have been preaching on how others in the Bible saw Jesus, as a way of helping us to think about how we see and relate to him as well. We have thought about Jesus as a second Adam figure with Paul, and about Jesus as our master and teacher with Nicodemus. We have considered what it should mean to us that Jesus was Jewish, a healer, a vision-restorer, and thirst-quencher. Today we will conclude the series with the famous story from John’s gospel about the raising of Lazarus. In this story, Martha makes the boldest statement in the whole of John’s gospel about who Jesus is. Like Peter in the Synoptic gospels, she affirms that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” (Jn. 11:27). But since we’ll be thinking about Jesus that way throughout Holy Week, today I want us to consider the other way that Martha saw Jesus, even though she didn’t say it out loud. Martha saw Jesus as a friend.

When we think of the term “friend,” I suspect few of us think of Jesus first. More likely, we think about the human beings who are special to us from various stages of our lives. For little children, it doesn’t take much for someone to become a special friend; anyone who laughs at the same jokes, wear the same shoes, lives next door, or likes to play the same way on recess can qualify. When we grow older, we get a bit more discerning. Our friends are the people we choose to hang out with because they “get us” or we think they are cool. Friends in the teen years feel more important than family, so even though friendships during these years are frequently fraught with betrayals and misunderstanding, they still end up helping us to discover who we really are. Then by college, most of us have figured that out enough to be able to make the kind of friendships that last a lifetime. I know that even though I don’t see or talk to my college gang regularly, I could call any one of them and pick up right where we left off. I bet you have a few friends like that too.

Adulthood brings other kinds of friendships. Some people find the best friends of their lives in their work colleagues, the parents of their children’s friends, or their buddies at the gym. Some find new friends or refresh old friendships on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram; although for everyone who finds a real connection through social media, there are probably many more who are friends in name only. That’s not the kind of friendship I’m talking about today. Today I want us to think about the true friends you can talk to and enjoy in ways that feed the body, mind, and spirit, and the kind of friendships that strengthen us by offering love, wisdom, and help. This is the kind of friendship Mary and Martha and Lazarus had with Jesus.

We don’t know how the trio of siblings and Jesus first became friends. I searched diligently this week for legends about how they met since the Bible is silent about it, and still came up empty. There are plenty of legends about what happened to Lazarus after he was brought back to life. One legend says he became Bishop of Cyprus, but never smiled for 30 years because he had seen too much while he was dead. One says he wrote an account of everything he saw in the next world, which unfortunately has been lost. Some say he followed Peter into Syria,

or that he was put into a leaky boat at Jaffa with his sisters and others but managed to keep it afloat. Still others say that he traveled in an “oarless boat” all the way to Gaul, where he served as the bishop of Marseilles until he was martyred and buried in a cave. Whatever became of Lazarus, there is a tomb for him in Cyprus which was discovered in 890 C.E. and bears the inscription, “Lazarus, bishop of Larnaca. Four days dead. Friend of Jesus.”

“Friend of Jesus.” Think about what that might mean. Let’s assume, since it’s the most likely scenario, that Lazarus and his sisters met Jesus when Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem for the high holidays. Bethany, where the siblings lived with their family, was just outside of Jerusalem. Perhaps their kids were all around the same age and found each other in the crowds, or Joseph knew Lazarus’ father, or Lazarus’ mother offered them shelter for the holiday season. However they became acquainted, by the time our story takes place, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were more than acquaintances of Jesus; they were his best friends. “The one whom you love is sick,” Jesus was told. That’s the literal translation of *philos*, the Greek word for friend: “one who is loved.” Lazarus in particular had a special place in Jesus’ heart.

It seems kind of shocking at first to think of Jesus having any kind of best friend, let alone one who wasn’t counted among the twelve disciples. Even knowing that Jesus was human, and humans have friends, in John’s Gospel there is so much emphasis on Jesus being divine that it still feels a bit unexpected. We don’t generally think of God having best friends. But according to the Old Testament, even before God became incarnate in Jesus, God did have “besties.” Both Moses and Abraham are described not just as God’s chosen servants, but also as “God’s friends.” For example, *Exodus* chapter 33 says, “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend;” and the prophet Isaiah, while speaking for God, said, “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend.” (Is.41:8). Apparently having dear friends *is* part of both the divine and human experience. God has always had people who held a special place in God’s heart.

We see Jesus act on his close friendship in a number of ways in this text. First, Jesus risks his life going back to Jerusalem to see Lazarus even though the authorities there were trying to kill him, and the disciples thought it was too risky. Second, when he joins the mourners at the tomb, he weeps, not just with silent picturesque tears, but with tears filled with rage according to the Greek. Jesus felt what we feel when someone dies—anger, grief, pain. Third, he did what was in his power to help his friends; he brought Lazarus back to life, even though doing so basically guaranteed that the authorities would then want to kill him for doing so, which they did. Effectively, Jesus stepped into the tomb when Lazarus came out; that’s how much he loved him.

You may still be thinking in your head, “Yea well, that’s all fine and dandy, but what kind of friend would allow his friend to die when he had the power to prevent it?” That’s a valid question which this text raises for most people. But before we leap to judging Jesus for being a bad friend, it helpful to know what Jesus’ own definition of friendship was. He provides this to his disciples a few chapters after this one. In *John* Chapter 15, he tells his disciples: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but

I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” (Jn. 15:12-17).

Gleaning from this text, we see that to be called “friend” by Jesus is not to be spared all pain and suffering. It is not to be given perfect security and happiness either. To be Jesus’ friend is to be chosen to have an intimate relationship with God. It is to be someone who has been told what God cares about and is doing. It is to be someone for whom Jesus would, out of love, be willing to die. In other words, we are all “friends of Jesus.” We were chosen by God’s grace to have an intimate relationship with God through Christ. We have been told by Jesus what God has done and will do for us, and what God wants for us. And we have received the greatest gift a friend can give, his life for our own. This is what Jesus came to do, not to save a single individual friend but to save all of his friends. This is why he let Lazarus die, so before his own death happened, he could reveal to all God’s power to defeat the lasting power of death through him. Lazarus’ story foreshadows Jesus’ own story. The cross and empty tomb proclaim to each of us that we are “the ones whom Jesus loved.”

This is the good news of the Gospel, but today I want to challenge us to go one step further after embracing it because the expression “friend of Jesus” goes two ways. Jesus may count us as friends, but do we count him the same? Throughout Lent we have been thinking of God from a position of subordination: God is master, we are servants; God is teacher, we are students; God is healer, we are patients. But to think of Jesus as friend is to relate to God in a very different way. Does this mean we are equals (because we know we really are not)? Does this mean we have to give our lives for him, which most of us, if we are honest, aren’t quite ready to do? Do we dare to call Jesus’ friend if we aren’t?

Yes, according to John. We can call Jesus friend if we love others as Jesus commanded. We can if we bear fruit that will last by striving to build up God’s kingdom on earth. We can if, like Martha and Mary in today’s story, we relate to Jesus with intimacy and trust under all circumstances. Did you notice how Martha speaks to Jesus in this story? She is the one who knows better than anyone else in John’s gospel up to this point that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God; yet even knowing that she does not greet him on the road as if she is greeting a distant or dangerous deity who might smite her is she speaks her mind. She doesn’t even greet him with the typical Jewish response when someone dies: “Blessed be God, the true judge.” Instead she skips the niceties and confronts Jesus with the very fact that bothers us too when we read this story: “if you had been here my brother would not have died.” “Where were you?” she basically says, like someone whose friend has let her down. “I thought you loved Lazarus! How could you not stop this?” Martha throws the weight of the theodicy dilemma of bad things happening to good people right in Jesus’ face.

I’m so glad she did this because if she hadn’t, we might not have known that we can. So many people fear being angry with God. So many people fear questioning God as well. But as Martha demonstrated, it’s OK to be honest with God; in fact, that’s one of the reasons why Jesus came. Jesus came so that we might have as intimate a relationship with God through him as he

had with God himself. We may not be equals in power or wisdom or authority because we are not divine ourselves. But thanks to Jesus we still can communicate to God as if God is our best friend because God is. Do you talk to God in the same way you would talk to your best friend over coffee or in the car, or do you tie yourself in knots trying to pray “the official way?” Do you share with God your triumphs and tragedies at least as much as you do with your Facebook and Instagram friends? In Greek and Roman culture, one of the criteria for true friendship was “frank speech.” Jesus constantly said, “I tell you the truth” to demonstrate his friendship with humanity through his honest speech. The least we can do is do the same with him.

After Martha vents her frustration, however, she then reaffirms her trust in him. “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him,” Martha said. This is another sign of true friendship, the willingness to trust the other in good times and bad. Think about what you would trust your dearest friend with if necessary. It’s not uncommon for people to trust their friends so much they designate them as guardians for their children in case of emergency. It’s not uncommon for people to trust their friends so much that they give them the benefit of the doubt again and again and defend them even when others would abandon them. It’s not uncommon for best friends to lend money to each other, even though money is the greatest idol of our age. This is the kind of trust God wants from us—the kind that says, “O God I know you are with me and love me even when bad things are happening.” God wants us to trust not because we fear God’s wrath, or because we understand intellectually that God is all-powerful and God’s way is beyond our understanding, but because Jesus is our friend and we love him.

Beyond this, all of the other aspects of friendship that we get from human beings we also get from God if we think of Jesus as friend. We get to spend time with someone who truly “gets us,” maybe even more than our families do (and even when we have to be social distancing from others). We get to have someone in our lives who we can always reach out to and pick up where we left off, even if we haven’t talked in a while. We get to have someone who helps us to figure out who we really are, who supports us through working and parenting, keeps us company when we exercise, weeps when we weep, and rejoices when we rejoice. Who wouldn’t want a friend like that?

We all can have this. If we seek it, however, we must always keep in mind that friendship with Jesus cannot be self-serving. We can have an intimate relationship, and have our hearts warmed when he calls us the same. We can benefit from his support, wisdom, and love. But for Jesus, friendship was most about loving others, not just ourselves. We must love others as he loved us because that is the means by which Jesus chose to transfer the revelation of God in him to us. We reveal God when we love and serve others as he did.

“What a friend we have in Jesus,” one of our hymns for today begins. Trust and believe the good news that you are “one whom Jesus loved,” so much that he gave his life so that you could have an intimate relationship with God in this world and the next. Dare to see him as friend you can talk to and trust in, and then go and love others as he commanded that we do. It’s the friendly thing to do. Amen.