

The Joy of Love

God's command is clear: love one another as God in Christ has loved us. This steadfast love requires much of us, even as far as laying down our lives for another. Yet this love gives much: joy, inclusion, divine and human friendship, security, deliverance, equity, justice. How can we help but make a joyful noise to God?

Focus scripture: John 15:9–17

John 15:9–17 follows last week's "I am the true vine" passage and continues to expand on the character of Christian love. This love is a joy, not a burden. However, it is not "easy" or sentimental: it requires nothing less than a willingness to lay down one's life for one's friends. To become a friend of Jesus carries a commitment, obedience to the commandment to love one another sacrificially, as Jesus has loved us (see also John 13:34). In this friendship, we make ourselves vulnerable in making ourselves known to others, as did Jesus. This vulnerability brings risk, but it also brings the promise of abiding together, of deepening our relationships. Self-revelation, in this sense, can be a form of laying down one's life for others.

Psalm 98 is an explosion of extravagant praise. It is joyful and wild. The imagery is beautifully vivid. Humanity and creation play their instruments and sing their song in celebration of God's deliverance, God's salvation (described as God's victory in *NRSV*).

This psalm has in view both the particular relationship between Israel and the LORD (a reference specifically to the Israelite deity, a name often rendered as "Yahweh"), and this same God as being universally sovereign over "the nations." Thus, a more layered, nuanced understanding of God's marvellous saving acts is required, as "victory" becomes a matter of perspective. When Israel prevails, another suffers defeat. The implications of this duality must not be lost on contemporary interpreters.

However, two important words, justice and righteousness, further shape interpretation of this psalm. God's steadfast love and faithfulness ensure that God's

justice (undifferentiated in Hebrew from "judgment") will be applied universally and equitably. The promise of this justice is a re-ordering in which both the oppressors and oppressed receive what they deserve. Furthermore, in Hebrew understanding, righteousness is not an attribute, but an act. It is to "do the right thing by" another. God, as judge, will bring justice to the marginalized and do right by those who have been abused and defeated. This is good news, indeed.

Acts 10:44–48 is the concluding episode in the story of Cornelius, which has unfolded in chapter 10. Peter is preaching to Cornelius's friends and family, whom Cornelius has gathered. Essentially repeating the eunuch's question from last week (Acts 8:36), using the same verb, hinder, Peter, asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people...?" The boundaries continue to be pushed outwards in the movement of the Spirit of God.

1 John 5:1–6 affirms the interrelationship between love of God, love of others, and obedience to God's commandments. In a subversion of the world's structures, that which is "victorious" in the world is not to be power or wealth or might or privilege. The victory comes via our faith, our belief.

• • • • •

The command to love as God loves, as Jesus Christ loves is multi-layered in its interpretation and asks so very much of us in its application in daily life. The psalmist, however, is undaunted and sings mightily and joyfully in celebration of the enacted love of God. In our singing and praying, individually and communally, what are ways in which we can weave together exuberant expressions of praise with calls for justice and righteousness?



Focus scripture

John 15:9–17

Additional scriptures

Acts 10:44–48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1–6

God who does marvellous things, we praise you. We lift our voices in a joyful noise, joining our song to that of creation. We give thanks for your righteousness, your steadfast love, your faithfulness, your justice. Amen.

Lecture Connection

links current events with this week's scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

A multiage group has its challenges sometimes, but it has the wonderful potential for children of different ages to become good friends. Children today are often segregated into peer groups, but in a multiage group, a six-year-old child can find a role model in an 11-year-old child. Friends form a central part of children's lives. Most children by this age have definite ideas about what makes a good friend. Peer cliques shift often. "Best friends" may change overnight, and a formerly close companion may hear the hurtful words, "You're not my friend!" The church school group and congregation are

places where the children can learn what it means to be a good and faithful friend. While peer friendships remain central, having adult friends is also important. Such cross-generational friendships within the church community provide children with valuable mentorship for living faithfully.

This week's session can help children learn more about Jesus as a model for friendship. Children who have enjoyed the companionship of an imaginary friend won't find it difficult to have Jesus as a friend. Pray that each child will feel part of a community of friends, and extend Jesus' love to others.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, John 15:9–17, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 87).
- ❑ Prepare a worship space with a gold or yellow cloth, white pillar candle, gold spiral and tealights (see resource sheet "[Easter Season Resources](#)," p. 111).
- ❑ Bring matches, taper, offering basket, and Bible with bookmark placed in this week's focus passage.
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2), and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 7), *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 7), and CD player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring copies of the resource sheet "[Easter Season Resources](#)" (p.111); save copies for next Sunday.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "Somlandela/ We Will Follow" (p. 34 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #22 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

Engage

- ❑ Bring resource sheets "[I Call You Friends](#)" and "[The New Testament](#)" (p. 112).
- ❑ **Image group:** a picture of a person standing or sitting alone

- ❑ **Weaving group:** construction paper, copy of instructions on this week's resource sheet "[Friendship](#)"

Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Community zone:** no supplies needed
- ❑ **Prayer zone (younger children):** craft foam, squares of card stock, copy of instructions on this week's resource sheet "[Friendship](#)"
- ❑ **Prayer zone (older children):** two different colours of paper, pieces of card stock, copies of this week's resource sheet "[Heart Baskets](#)"
- ❑ **Craft zone:** large variety of coloured beads, large variety of colours of pipe cleaners, copy of instructions on this week's resource sheet "[Friendship](#)"
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** list of churches partnered with your denomination or congregation, writing and art supplies
- ❑ **Easter zone:** question box from previous weeks, slips of paper

Bless

- ❑ Bring the "[Blessing song](#)" (p. 110) or the song "Look Up, Look Down" (pp. 24–25 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #9 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).



The Joy of Love

Scripture

John 15:9–17

FOCUS To learn about God's gift of friendship in Jesus and in one another

Gather

Welcome the children and introduce newcomers.

Opening ritual

Call to gather Invite children to gather in the worship space and lead them in the traditional Easter greeting:

Leader: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Children: Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

Easter ritual Invite a child to read the "Gathering prayer" on the resource sheet "[Easter Season Resources](#)" (p. 111), with the rest of the group responding with "Alleluia!" after each line. Invite another child to light the Christ candle and use a taper to light five tealights in the spiral.

Sing, if possible, the song "Somlandela/We Will Follow" (p. 34 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #22 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7)

Receive the offering and extinguish the candles to signify the end of the gathering worship.

Connecting with the focus

Invite children to think of a friend.

■ What makes someone a good friend?

Invite children to talk about some of the things that they like to do with their friends.

■ Why do you think friendship is important?

Explain that Jesus had some good friends too and that today's Bible story is about something that Jesus told his friends.

Engage

Preparing for the story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship table and use the bookmark to open to the focus passage. Recall that during the Easter season we have been exploring stories in the New Testament about Jesus' friends and followers. Look together again at the resource sheet "[The New Testament](#)" (p. 112) to refresh memories about the different books in this part of the Bible. Explain that it was many years after Jesus' death and resurrection before people began writing down the stories and teachings of Jesus. This week we read another story about Jesus and his friends from the gospel of John.

The Bible story

Use the resource sheet "[I Call You Friends](#)" to tell this week's story. Preface the story with a

reminder that the story begins with followers of Jesus after the Resurrection. They have come together to remember Jesus' teachings. When you reach the last section, distribute the sentence strips (based on **John 15:9–17**) and invite children to read these in order.

■ What have you learned today from Jesus' words about love and friendship?

Exploring the story further

(To enable the children to explore the scripture reading further, according to their interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.)

Image group The children in this group will have an opportunity to think about what it would have been like to spend time with Jesus and his friends. Look at the image of the person standing

or sitting alone and imagine that you are standing beside him or her, waiting for Jesus and his friends to come for a visit.

■ **What would you like to do together?**

■ **What questions would you like to ask Jesus?**

■ **What would you like to tell Jesus?**

Weaving group The children in this group will have an opportunity to make a visual reminder of the web of friendship mentioned at the end of the story. Review the instructions for “Friendship weaving” from the resource sheet “[Friendship](#)” and invite children to make weavings of strips with the names of others in the group.

Reporting Invite the image group to share some thoughts about an imaginary visit with Jesus and the weaving group to show what they have created.

The Bible story and us

We, too, are followers of Jesus and can count on Jesus as a friend.

■ **How do you feel, knowing that Jesus calls you “friend”?**

■ **As friends of Jesus, how can we be friends to each other?**

■ **How might you be a friend to others in the way that Jesus was a friend?**

Respond

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

❑ **Community zone: Affirmation circle**

Jesus encouraged the disciples to be a community of friends who love and support each other. Gather in a circle, and invite children to take turns standing in the middle while the rest of the group members name a positive trait or something they admire or like about the one in the centre. Talk together about ways in which they might affirm and support friends and others at school and in their community.



❑ **Prayer zone (younger children): Prayer pockets**

Praying for friends is one way to show love and support. Provide the craft materials and the instructions for “Prayer pockets” from the resource sheet “[Friendship](#).” Children will make pockets out of craft foam and fill these with cards naming friends and family. Encourage children to choose a card each day and say a prayer for that person.

❑ **Prayer zone (older children): Heart baskets**

Jesus encouraged his followers to care for one another. Invite children to make woven heart baskets in which to place prayer cards. Distribute paper and copies of the resource sheet “[Heart Baskets](#)” and help children cut out and weave their papers together. Provide pieces of card stock and have children print the names of each of the other people in the group on separate cards and place these in their baskets. Encourage them to take a card out each night and pray for that person.

❑ **Craft zone: Friendship bracelets** Jesus invited his followers to care for one another and show God’s love through friendship. Provide the materials and the instructions for making the bracelets from the resource sheet “[Friendship](#).” Encourage children to make one bracelet for themselves and one or more for friends. Encourage children to pray for their friends whenever they wear their bracelet. Have them designate different coloured beads on their bracelets to represent each friend and one to represent Jesus.

❑ **Outreach zone: Making connections** The Christian church is a worldwide connection of friends. Invite children to initiate a connection with people in a church in another country that is partnered with your denomination or congregation. Provide writing and art supplies and invite children to write or draw something to introduce themselves to another. Review list of partner churches and choose one. Place the letters and drawings in an envelope; add a covering letter to explain the project, and mail to the chosen church.

❑ **Easter zone: Question box** If a “Question box” was made on April 11, encourage children to add more questions if they desire. Explain that next week guests will visit the group to discuss the questions that have been collected.

Bless

Gather around the worship table and invite a child to light the candles.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

Dear God,
thank you for this group of friends,
and for our friend Jesus. Amen.

Sing the "[Blessing song](#)" (p. 110) or "Look Up, Look Down" (pp. 24–25 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7, #9 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

Blessing Send each child out saying, "(Name), may God's peace go with you."

Reflect

What connections of friendship and caring are developing between you and the children, and among the children? How can the connection to the larger faith community be enhanced and strengthened?



I Call You Friends

including a paraphrase of John 15:9–17

Jesus' friends were an important part of his life. He enjoyed spending time with them. Jesus ate meals with his friends and went to wedding parties with them. Jesus and his friends were together a lot of the time. They travelled together from town to town as Jesus taught and healed the people and told stories about God's love. Jesus' friends were with him when he was arrested and during the scary time when Jesus was killed.

Days and weeks went by after that time. Many of Jesus' friends and followers were still in Jerusalem. They gathered together whenever they could. They greeted one another with: "Alleluia! Jesus is risen!" They ate meals together and remembered what Jesus had told them.

Because none of Jesus' teachings were written down at that time, his friends spent many hours

telling these teachings to one another. They told them over and over again so that they wouldn't forget. They especially liked to remember Jesus' teachings about being friends.

Here is what they remembered. (*Distribute sentence strips below and invite children to read them in numerical order.*)

As they remembered these teachings, Jesus' friends talked about what it meant to be a true friend. As they talked, they felt closer to Jesus and to one another. Jesus knew that when people are true friends who love and care for each other, they are connected in a special way. When something happens to one person it affects everyone else. When we share God's love we help to create a huge web of friendship that includes Jesus, his friends and followers, and each of us.

1. "I have loved you the way God has loved me. Stay in my love."
2. "If you keep my teachings, you will stay in my love. That's what I've done – kept God's commands and stayed in God's love. Be like me."
3. "I have told you these things so my joy may be your joy."
4. "This is my command: love one another as I have loved you."
5. "The very best way to love is to put your life on the line for your friends."
6. "You are my friends when you do what I command you, which is to love one another."
7. "I call you friends because I have told you everything I have learned from God."

(based on John 15:9–17)

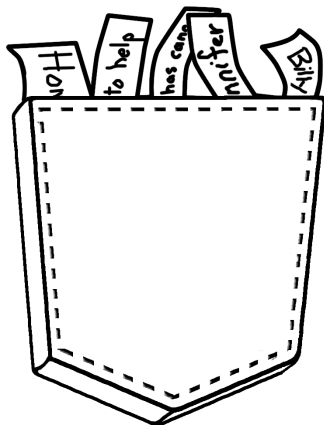


FRIENDSHIP

Prayer pockets

Instructions:

1. Staple two squares of craft foam to form a pocket.
2. Decorate with felt markers (for example, with "stitching" to look like a jeans pocket).
3. Write names or draw pictures of friends and family on pieces of card stock.
4. Place the cards in the pocket.



Friendship weaving

Preparation:

For each child:

1. Fold a piece of grey or brown construction paper in half horizontally.
2. Cut slits from the fold to about 3 cm/1 in from the edge.
3. Cut sheets of coloured construction paper into 5 cm/2 in strips (one colour for each child, and enough strips so each child has one for each classmate).

Instructions:

Children will:

1. write their names on their strips of construction paper and decorate if desired
2. give one name strip to each classmate
3. carefully weave the collected coloured strips through the slits in their construction paper mats
4. leave, if possible, some space to add more strips.

Friendship bracelets

Instructions:

1. Twist three different colours of pipe cleaners together at one end to tie together.
2. Thread one coloured bead at a time onto the middle pipe cleaner.
3. Bring the two outside pipe cleaners around each bead and twist together to hold the bead in place.
4. Repeat with different colours of beads until long enough to fit around a wrist.
5. Twist all ends of the three pipe cleaners together to form into a bracelet.



Heart Baskets



Materials

- ❑ 2 different shades of construction paper cut into 18 cm/7 in. x 5 cm/2 in. strips
- ❑ construction paper cut into 15 cm/6 in. strips
- ❑ glue ❑ scissors

How to make the baskets

1. Select two contrasting shades of the larger construction paper strips. Fold each one in half lengthwise so it is now 9 cm/3 ½ in.
2. With scissors, round off the open ends of the strip. Do NOT cut the folded end.

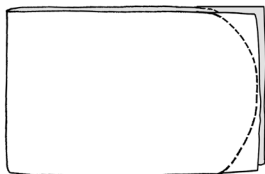


Illustration 1

3. With a ruler, measure 5 cm/2 ½ in. from the fold and make a light pencil line across the paper. Then place the ruler on that line and mark it at 1.5 cm/¾ in. intervals. This will give you three sections. Cut from the fold to the pencil line across the paper so there are three strips.

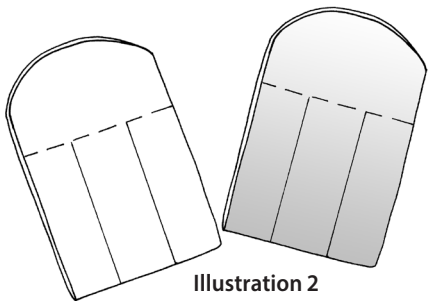


Illustration 2

4. Begin weaving by taking the first strip of one side of the heart and weaving it in and out of the strips of the other side of the heart. Important note: Weave in and out through the middle of the loops, not over and under them.

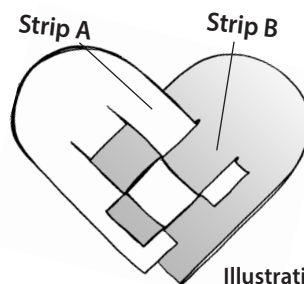


Illustration 3

5. Slide strip A up to make room for strip B. Weave strip B in the same manner as strip A.
6. Continue until the whole heart is woven together.

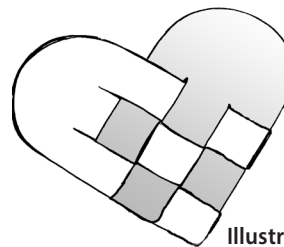
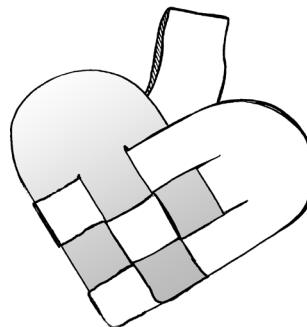


Illustration 4

7. Fold in half a shorter strip of construction paper (using one of the shades in the heart). Glue it to the top of the back of the heart for a hanger.



Rituals for Lent

Lenten rainbow pathway

Create a pathway of “stepping stones” using large circles cut from coloured construction paper: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Cut several circles of each colour to make the pathway connect from the doorway of your meeting space to the worship area. During Lent the children will follow this rainbow path of stepping stones to gather in the worship space during the opening ritual each week.

Gathering prayers

Choose two volunteers to read the opening prayer each week: one will light the candle and the other will place an object (symbolizing the focus scripture theme) beside the candle. These symbols can remain in the worship space with all five displayed on the fifth Sunday. There are only five prayers included on this page because there will be a special all-ages gathering on Palm/Passion Sunday.

Gathering song

(tune: “Frère Jacques/Are You Sleeping”)

(Children repeat the bolded lines.)

God is with us. **God is with us.**

Every day. **Every day.**

God will always love us. **God will always love us.**

Thank you, God. **Thank you, God.**

Blessing song

(tune: “Frère Jacques/Are You Sleeping”)

(Children repeat the bolded lines.)

May God bless you. **May God bless you.**

Keep you safe. **Keep you safe.**

May God’s love surround you.

May God’s love surround you.

Go in peace. **Go in peace.**

Lent 1

One: Lent is a special time of praying. (*Light the purple candle.*)

Two: On this first Sunday of Lent we say “Thank you, God”
for the rainbow which is a sign of God’s love.
(*Place a rainbow-coloured object beside the candle.*)

One: Lent is a special time for thinking about God.

Two: God has promised to be with us always.

All: Thank you, God. Amen.

Lent 2

One: Lent is a special time of praying. (*Light the purple candle.*)

Two: On this second Sunday of Lent we say “Thank you, God”
for all the stars in the sky that remind us of God’s love. (*Place a star beside the candle.*)

One: Lent is a special time for thinking about God.

Two: God has promised to be with us always.

All: Thank you, God. Amen.

Lent 3

One: Lent is a special time of praying. (*Light the purple candle.*)

Two: On this third Sunday of Lent we say “Thank you, God”

for all the wonderful things in creation. (*Place an object from nature beside the candle.*)

One: Lent is a special time for thinking about God.

Two: God has promised to be with us always.

All: Thank you, God. Amen.

Lent 4

One: Lent is a special time of praying. (*Light the purple candle.*)

Two: On this fourth Sunday of Lent we say “Thank you, God”
for giving us hope when times are hard. (*Place a stone beside the candle.*)

One: Lent is a special time for thinking about God.

Two: God has promised to be with us always.

All: Thank you, God. Amen.

Lent 5

One: Lent is a special time of praying. (*Light the purple candle.*)

Two: On this fifth Sunday of Lent we say “Thank you, God”
for your love that is deep in our hearts. (*Place a heart beside the candle.*)

One: Lent is a special time for thinking about God.

Two: God has promised to be with us always.

All: Thank you, God. Amen.



Easter Season Resources

Prepare an Easter worship space...

1. Cover a small table with a gold or yellow cloth and place a white pillar candle in the middle.
2. Create a spiral shape leading out from the central candle by sprinkling a pathway of gold confetti or sequins.
3. Place six tealights at intervals along the spiral, with the last one at the end.
4. Each week the central candle will be lit first and a taper will then be used to light additional tealights, until all are lit by the seventh Sunday of Easter (May 20). These tealights will symbolize the growing light as the good news about the risen Christ spread out among the disciples and into the community.

Gathering prayer

Reader: Loving God, we celebrate this Season of Easter, a time of new life and joy.

All: Alleluia!

Reader: We are called to be witnesses to the new life in Christ. (*Light the central Christ candle.*)

All: Alleluia!

Reader: We are called to spread the light of this good news. (*Light one or more tealights, adding one each week.*)

All: Alleluia!

Somlandela

Somlandela, sonlandelu Jesu,
Somlandela, yonke indawo.
Somlandela, sonlandelu Jesu,
Lapho eyakhona somlandela.

We will follow, we will follow Jesus.
We will follow, we will follow him.
We will follow, we will follow Jesus.
Wherever he will lead us we will follow.

Traditional Zulu song

Prayer lines (May 20)

I thank God for your gift of music in our church community.

I thank God for your leadership in our church community.

I thank God for the way you care for our church building.

I thank God for the ways you help lead worship.

I thank God for your visits to people who are sick or can't get to church.

Thank you hand cards (May 20)

Fold construction paper in half and trace a hand outline.
(See illustration #1.)

Cut out the shape, leaving the folded side intact to make a card.

Choose a prayer line, cut it out, and glue it inside the card.
(See illustration #2.)

Write your name below the message.

On the outside of the card, print the name of the person chosen to receive the card.



Illustration #1



Illustration #2



The New Testament

The books on this bookshelf are all in the part of the Bible called "The New Testament." How many books are there?

The gospels

The first four books include stories about Jesus. Look in your Bible to find the whole title for each of these books. What do these titles tell you about these books? Each writer tells the stories about Jesus in slightly different ways.

Acts

The first book after the gospels is usually called Acts. But the name of this book is longer. Look in your Bible to see what it is. This book is thought to be a continuation of one of the gospels. Which one? (*Find out by looking at the introduction to this book in your Bible.*)

Letters

All the books following Acts except the last one are letters written to various churches, or individuals, or groups of people. How many letters are there? The titles of these books might be the name of the writer or the name of the receiver. Sometimes more than one letter was written to the same person or group. Which ones are these?

The last book

The last book in the New Testament describes the visions of a man called John. What is it called?

