

When I was in my forties I made a new friend who wasn't like anyone else I ever knew. He was a retired German priest who looked like a magician out of a fairy tale. Or maybe an elf, depending on the day. He would tell me stories. One day he told me the story of his wife's dying. He said it was the most profound and richest time of their entire relationship. I found this very puzzling. How did that make sense, that his wife is dying and he thinks it's the best it's ever been? "Listen," he said. "The closer she came to death, the more distilled she became. It was like God was washing away all that kept her from being purely herself. She just became more and more beautiful. It was such an honour to be there." I did listen and I had to think long and hard to understand what he was saying.

Some of my most powerful life lessons have come to me from my own dear friends as they were dying. I've been witness to people choosing love and joy over all the other possible things they might have chosen. They might be living with constant pain, physical breakdown of their bodies, and the visible grief of those who love them. They are living within a hand's reach of the end of their living, the end of all they know. And there they are, opening their hearts wider and wider, deeper and deeper, beaming out love and light to those around them. It is very humbling to be in the presence of such love. It's life-transforming.

Maybe it's like one preacher writes:

"Love is what life is all about. From the moment we are born until the moment we die; every second, every minute, every hour, every day, every month, every year, every decade, and every moment in between, God is trying to teach us one thing. To love as God loves. And the shape of love is always changing. The shape of love is always expanding. Foolish is the person who thinks that he or she knows what love is at fifteen, or twenty-five or fifty-five or seventy-five, because the shape of God's love in us is forever expanding and changing in our lives."

I believe we all have to think long and hard about God's love for and in us. It's so hard for us to get it. It's almost more than our minds can encompass. How do we make space in our understanding for this love Jesus is describing:

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.

Can we fit that truth into our hearts and heads? That Jesus, God, has chosen us as friends? WOW. True friends. The kind of friends where we can be completely ourselves with each other, with our gifts and our flaws, our courage and our fearfulness, our brilliance and our stupidity. All that we are we bring to a real friendship without having to worry or be afraid. Because we know a true friend sees who we really are and treasures exactly that. And there is such joy in that being known and knowing. There we are - hearts opening and touching. And that is what God wants with us. Wants for us. Can we allow ourselves to believe this, to rest into it and trust it?

Jesus has chosen us as friend.. We get to choose too... will we choose him back? He tells us what we will experience when we step past our fears and misgivings to love him as a dearest friend:

*"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be complete."*

Sometimes we may feel like that joy is elusive. We might be wondering where has the joy gone in my life? And how do I get it back? Which might lead us to ponder on what are the things we do which actually nurture and make space for joy to inhabit our life? The answer is here in the words of Jesus - simply by loving one another. Of course sometimes it might not feel simple to do that at all! It might feel so difficult we can't imagine being able to pull it off. We might not even be able to imagine wanting to pull it off. And yet... **knowing that God has chosen us, loves us, and will use us** gives us the courage to face such challenges. Knowing we are chosen and loved by God as friends of God gives us new strength to step up to whatever is most difficult, most painful, most heart-rending. In the words of the Skin Horse to the Velveteen Rabbit in that beautiful children's story by Margery Williams Bianco - this is how we become real. Sometimes it hurts he tells the rabbit. He goes on:

It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. Once you are real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.'

And that is what God is wanting for us - that we become fully ourselves, fully alive, fully real. And the way we do it is this love one another as Jesus loves us. Think on it: there is nothing we can do or not do, say or not say that will stop Jesus from loving us as we are. We are seen, we are known. What wondrous joy is this, oh my soul!

Amen