

You Are My Friends: Friendship-Shaped Discipleship

John 15:12-17

In the series “Love One Another: From Othering to Neighboring”

Let me start with a question. When was the last time somebody asked you, “How are you?”—and then actually waited for the answer?

Most of us know the difference between being greeted and being known. We get greeted all the time. By coworkers. By neighbors. By the person at the checkout. By folks who “like” our posts.

But being known is something else. Being known is when somebody remembers what you told them last week and asks again. Notices something’s off. Stays long enough to hear the real answer.

And here’s what I’ve noticed—maybe you have, too. A lot of us have gotten very good at functioning while staying mostly unknown. We can be surrounded by people and still carry the real stuff by ourselves.

That’s why a few words in John 15 stop me every time. Jesus doesn’t only say, “Follow me.” Jesus says, **“I have called you friends.”**

So why is that kind of friendship so hard to find? I don’t think it’s because we don’t want it. I think life squeezes it out. Work. Caregiving. Kids and grandkids. A move. Retirement. An illness. A loss. And most friendships don’t end in a fight—they just fade.

Many of us quietly believe that friendship is what we get to once everything else gets done. And here’s the problem: everything else never gets done.

This isn’t just a feeling. In 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory called “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” It reported that about half of American adults experience measurable loneliness, and that lacking connection raises the risk of early death about as much as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.¹ In other words: we were made for each other, and for a lot of us, that’s lonely.

Now listen to when Jesus says what he says. It's the night before the cross. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet. Jesus has told them that he's leaving. Everything urgent is pressing in. And what does Jesus talk about? Friendship.

Think back over our series. In Week One we learned to see the person in front of us. In Week Two we made love visible. Last week Jesus told us to stay connected to the Vine, because we can't love in our own strength. Today in our Gospel lesson from John 15, we find out what that connected life looks like when we live it together. It looks like friendship.

Jesus forms friendship-shaped disciples. Notice the order. Jesus says, "I have called you friends." And a few lines later: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

Jesus doesn't say, "Prove you're useful, and then I'll make room for you." Jesus chooses. Jesus names. Jesus invites.

Some of us carry a picture of faith where Jesus is mostly a supervisor with a clipboard. Did you do enough? Believe enough? Serve enough? But in this passage, Jesus says one word: **friend**.

In the United Methodist tradition, we have a name for this: prevenient grace. It's a big phrase for a simple idea—God's love is already reaching toward us before we ever reach back. Before we get it right. Before we even know to ask.

That matters, because verse 12 gives a command—"love one another"—and it would be easy to hear that as "try harder." It's not. We don't love our way into Jesus' friendship. Jesus' friendship teaches us how to love.

Jesus does not begin with your usefulness to him; he begins with relationship.

Jesus does not begin with your usefulness. Jesus begins with relationship.

Jesus says, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Friendship has a shape and a cost. Look at that little word “as.” “Love one another **as** I have loved you.” Jesus doesn’t ask us to invent love from scratch. Jesus points to love the disciples have already watched: feet washed, truth told, forgiveness offered, a presence that stayed. And then Jesus names the cost: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

The first meaning of that verse is about Jesus. Jesus really did give his life. But that pattern spills into ordinary days. Laying down our lives can look like laying down our time. Our convenience. Our comfort. Our need to stay uninvolved.

Just to be clear, let me say what laying down our lives does not mean. It does not mean remaining in an abusive relationship or situation. It doesn’t mean staying in danger, nor does it mean giving up healthy boundaries. If you’re in a relationship where you aren’t safe, seeking safety is not a failure of love. Jesus never asks anyone to be mistreated. If that’s you, please talk with me or someone you trust after worship.

So what does this kind of love look like on an ordinary street? Let me tell you a true story.

Marlena Graves is a writer and seminary professor. She tells this story in an article on the United Methodist Church’s website.² In 2013, major changes at the Christian university where she and her husband worked left them both let go. She calls it an excruciating, traumatic experience. Her husband found work quickly, and she eventually did, too. But nothing could replace the community and close friends they had lost.

Shortly after the move, a United Methodist pastor, Larry, and his wife, Marti, were out on their daily walk. They stopped to talk with Marlena’s husband while he was mowing the lawn.

That’s it. A conversation at the edge of a lawn.

But it didn't stay a conversation. They invited the family into their home. Into church. They babysat the children. Then Larry and Marti started a small group and invited the Graveses to join. In a brand-new town, Marlena writes, these were people who knew their names and cared whether they lived or died.

Nobody performed one heroic act. They stopped. They talked. And then they kept making room. That's what verse 13 looks like on an ordinary street.

Most friendship isn't built by one big sacrifice. It's built by a thousand small choices to stay available.

I want you to think about a time someone made room for you. **Example**

Now, it's your turn, turn to someone near you and finish the sentence, "A time someone made room for me was ..." If you're joining us online, type your thought in the comments. Then we'll come back together. *[Pause]*

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Next, Jesus calls his disciples "friends." He certainly would have been correct to call them "servants," as he has already acknowledged that night that he is their Master and Teacher. But, instead, he calls them "friends." Now verse 15. Jesus says servants don't know what their master is doing. But friends do. Jesus has shared with them everything learned from God. Jesus isn't giving up being Lord. Jesus is letting them in on what God is up to. Not just labor. Partners.

That's a big shift for churches. We can get very good at doing things for people while staying at a distance from them. Meals, rides, help—all of that is good, and it's holy. But a project asks, "What can I do for you?" Friendship also asks, "Who are you? What matters to you? What might we do together?"

Look again Pastor Larry and his wife Marti. They didn't just do something for the Graves family. They brought them into their home, into their church, into their group. People aren't projects. People are participants.

And friendship runs both ways. Not only “I’ll help you,” but “I’ll let you help me.” Not only “I’ll listen,” but “Here’s what’s really going on with me.” Not only “I’ll encourage you,” but “I’ll let you tell me the truth.”

You can serve someone without being known by them. Friendship asks more.

John Wesley, who started the Methodist movement, understood this. He said there is “no holiness but social holiness.”³ He meant we don’t grow in love for God and neighbor alone; we grow together. So early Methodists met every week in small groups called class meetings, led by lay women and men. The question they asked each other was simple: “How is it with your soul?” They called it “watching over one another in love.”⁴

That’s not an extra in Methodism. That’s the method. A good friend doesn’t only make you feel accepted. A good friend helps you become the person God is shaping you to be. Wesley called that growing in holiness—which is just a churchy way of saying growing in love.

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Jesus continues in verse 16: “I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” Chosen doesn’t mean better than everybody else. Chosen means entrusted. We aren’t chosen to become an exclusive circle. We’re chosen to become a fruitful community.

A circle of friends should be a doorway, not a wall.

And notice the word “last.” Lasting fruit looks like dependability. Friendship is proven not only by who shows up on the hardest day, but by who’s still there on an ordinary Tuesday. Marlena Graves didn’t describe one dramatic rescue. She described invitation after invitation—a home, a church, childcare, a small group.

And she says plainly that this kind of friendship and community is a life-or-death matter.²

The same verse ends with a promise about asking God in Jesus' name. That's not a blank check. In this setting it's about love. So here's a prayer worth praying this week: "Jesus, help me love this person faithfully. Give me patience. Give me courage. Give me wisdom. Give me what I need to keep showing up."

So what do we do with all this? Three things. Not ten. Three.

First, receive. Say yes to the friendship Jesus is already offering. If you've been living as though you have to earn your place, you don't. Jesus chose you. Today—maybe for the first time, maybe for the thousandth—you can say, "Jesus, I receive your friendship." And if you're not sure what you believe, you're welcome here. You can start with honesty. We'll pray together in a moment.

Next, be known. This week, choose one person you trust enough to go beneath small talk. Share one real thing. Not your deepest secret—just something honest. "I've been discouraged." "I'm worried about..." "I could use prayer for..."

You don't become known by being impressive. You become known by being honest.

And if you're ready for more, ask this: "What are you seeing in me that I might not be seeing?" That one question moves friendship toward discipleship.

If no one comes to mind, that's not a reason for shame. It's an invitation.

Then, make room. Think of one person—a neighbor, someone new, someone in a hard season—and be Larry and Marti for them. Stop. Say their name. Ask a real question. Invite them into something ordinary: a walk, a coffee, the seat next to you. And then do it again next week.

Imagine a church known for this.

Friendliness says, "Good morning." Friendship says, "I noticed you weren't here."

Friendliness says, “Hope you’re doing okay.” Friendship says, “How are you, really?”

Friendliness says, “Let us know if you need anything.” Friendship says, “I’m free Tuesday. What would actually help?”

Friendliness is good, but friendship shares life.

Imagine people who have been here for decades and families who just found us, and everyone is known, not just greeted. People who tell one another the truth in love. Dependable people who are also allowed to need help. People who stay through grief and get through disagreements. Small circles that keep making room.

Four weeks ago we started by learning to see the person in front of us. We end here. Jesus doesn’t just give us work to do. Jesus gives us a life to share.

Jesus says, **“I chose you.”** Jesus says, **“I have called you friends.”** And then Jesus gives that friendship a direction: **“Love one another.”**

Following Jesus was never meant to be a solo project. We receive Christ’s friendship. We share life with one another. We tell the truth. We carry burdens, and we let ourselves be carried. We keep showing up. And somewhere in all of that, Jesus forms us.

Let us pray. Gracious God, thank you for Jesus, who calls us friends. Thank you for choosing us before we ever chose you. Teach us to receive that friendship, to let ourselves be known, and to make room for others. Give us patience, courage, and wisdom to keep showing up. And form us together into people who love as Jesus loves. Amen.

We learn the way of Jesus together.

Sources & Citations *(not for the pulpit)*

¹ **Surgeon General advisory on loneliness.** U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” (May 2023). Reported in: NPR, “America has a loneliness epidemic. Here are 6 steps to address it,” May 2, 2023 (about half of U.S. adults report measurable loneliness; lacking connection

comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day). <https://www.wamc.org/2023-05-02/america-has-a-loneliness-epidemic-here-are-6-steps-to-address-it>

² **Marlena Graves story.** Marlena Graves, “Known and loved: Finding your community,” UMC.org (United Methodist Communications), published October 26, 2020. Source for the 2013 forced move, the Rev. Larry and Marti Kreps, the lawn conversation, the home/church/babysitting invitations, the small group, and her life-or-death statement. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/known-and-loved-finding-your-community>

³ **“No holiness but social holiness.”** Attributed to John Wesley; discussed in the Oxford University Press chapter “John Wesley’s Structure and Theology of Discipleship.” <https://academic.oup.com/book/27734/chapter/197910235> [Verify the primary citation (Wesley’s 1739 preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems) before printing it in a bulletin.]

⁴ **Class meetings and “watching over one another in love.”** “How did John Wesley empower lay people?” Ask The UMC, United Methodist Communications. Source for lay-led weekly classes, the question “How is it with your soul?”, and the phrase “watching over one another in love” (drawn from the General Rules). <https://www.umc.org/content/ask-the-umc-how-did-john-wesley-empower-lay-people>

Further reading: “Class Meeting” overview, Seedbed: <https://seedbed.com/?p=50351>