

**EASTER VI, 2018**  
**John 15.9-17**

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Greater love has no person than this, than to lay down his life for his friends. ... No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

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I managed to complete college a semester early, which pleased my parents because it saved half a year. (Though, in 1973-74 room, board, and tuition at Texas Lutheran College was just \$2,000.) Since I was coming home at the end of January, I spent Christmas with a college friend. (Christmas dinner was Mexican food. Somehow enchiladas, refried bean, rice and tamales did not measure up to turkey dinner.) We exchanged gifts. Tom gave me an album by John Denver. One of the songs on it was "Friends," with this refrain:

Friends, I will remember you,  
think of you, pray for you.  
And when another day is through,  
I'll still be friends with you.

The song is just one of many songs and poems and memorable sayings in praise of friendship that have been written over the centuries. Such as:

*Lean on me when you're not strong, and I will be your friend.* – Bill Withers, 1972.

*In good times, in bad times, I'll be on your side forevermore: that's what friends are for.* – Carole Bayr Sager, 1982.

*Do not walk in front of me; I may not follow. Do not walk behind me; I may not lead. Walk beside me and be my friend.* -- Rabbi Maimonides, 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Emily Dickinson, 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet, said, "My friends are my estate."

Aristotle, philosopher in Greece, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC: *Even one who possessed all goods would not wish to live without friends.*

*Make new friends and keep the old; one is silver and the other is gold.* (Girl Scout Song)

*It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.* – Ralph Waldo Emerson.

*Friends are the siblings God never gave us.*— Mencius, Chinese philosopher, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

*It is not that diamonds are a girl's best friend; it's your best friends who are your diamonds.*  
Gina Barreca, English professor.

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It can be asserted, however, that in our time friendship has been trivialized. In the pace of life, travel, moving here and there, the demands of work, it is easy to lose track of friends. Our addiction to social media tends to isolate people, not bring them together. "Facebook" has trivialized the meaning of "friends," reducing it to merely acquaintances or people we might be interested in.

Many do not take the time for friendship, resulting in a strange contradiction noted by former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy: "During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness." This in a world where people have hundreds of friends on Facebook and are more connected by technology than ever.

Today Jesus says to His disciples, to His Church, to us: "I have called you friends." Let us reflect on what Jesus is saying and what we might learn from His welcome of friendship.

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In the world of the Bible, friendship was one of the most important social relationships between people. The Greek word for friend comes from a verb that means to love, to care for. A friend is a person who loves, even to the point of giving one's life for the friend or community. Another characteristic of a friend was complete honesty and truthfulness in one's speech and actions.

Friendship exemplified the height of the virtuous life. Likewise, betrayal of a friend was viewed

as one of the worst of sins. In Dante's classic story *The Inferno*, the lowest level of hell was the sentence for three of the greatest betrayers in history: Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Julius Caesar, and of course Judas, the betrayer of Jesus.

In our Gospel reading today, friendship is the highest relationship with God. To be a friend of God means to share in God's eternal life.

We have stories of friendship in the Bible. Moses was called "a friend of the Lord." There is the famous friendship of David and Jonathon. But the ultimate illustration of friendship is Jesus. Jesus is the perfect model of friendship because He loves without limits and His words are truth.

So, Jesus is in John's Gospel the perfect friend; He illustrates perfectly the ideals of friendship that were part of the culture of the ancient world. But Jesus does something more. He makes us His friends. "No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends." That is something new, unique, and wonderful.

In Jesus's day no master would make his servant his friend. The servant was a lesser person, who existed to serve his master. Likewise, the gods did not make friends of human beings; people existed to serve the gods or were the playthings of the gods.

But Jesus welcomes us into friendship with God. He elevates our status to make us equal with Him. God makes friends with people. We are invited into community with God. Jesus shows us we are His friends by speaking the truth to us and laying down His life for us: the highest expression of what a friend is and does.

So, some simple questions. First, who can you turn to, to speak the truth to you, who will tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear? What if, on Facebook, there would be a button to tell you the honest truth, instead of a "like" button to flatter your ego? And if you went through that list of "friends" in your Facebook account, how many of them could you depend on to really put themselves out for you, to sacrifice for you? On the other hand, as our Gospel text for today suggests, "What a friend we have in Jesus...."

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I conclude with some thoughts from a favorite spiritual writer of our time (Fr. Ron Rolheiser).

"To be a healthy Christian means to pray, to live a good moral life, and to be involved with the poor. All three of these are non-negotiable. But this is not so easily conceded by all. Social justice movements are often accused of not emphasizing sufficiently private conversion, private prayer and private morality.

Conversely, [social justice promoters] make the criticism that Christianity has privatized conversion and produced a spirituality with an underdeveloped social conscience – namely, you are a good Christian as long as you say your prayers and attend church and obey the church's sexual commandments, irrespective of whether you are ignoring or even positively exploiting the poor.

Too many persons who both pray and do social justice are angry, bitter, lacking in gratitude and joy, and full of hate. What is lacking? In a word, friendship. A healthy spiritual life is anchored on three pillars, prayer, social justice, and friendship. The latter is as critical, and non-negotiable, as the former. Without the warming and mellowing that good friendship brings into life, we invariably lose gratitude and joy.

Only friendship can save us. Loving, challenging friends who can melt our bitterness and free us from the need to be angry are as critical within the spiritual life as are prayer and social justice. To neglect friendship is to court bitterness and perversion.

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Friends, I will remember you,  
think of you, pray for you.  
And when another day is through,  
I'll still be friends with you.

Even to our last day: that's Jesus, who welcomes us into eternal life, lasting friendship with God. Amen.