

The Art of Loving

John 15:9-17

My four year old has called me some strange things lately. One day he declared that I was his best friend. That melted my heart quite a bit. Later I learned that he calls practically everyone his best friend--his mother, his grandfather, and anyone who happens to be within earshot. But then he told me that I was his best, best friend. Of course. Now I thought I had something special to brag about, until I learned that he told his mother the same thing days before. One day, he told me that I'm his girlfriend. I said, "No, daddy's a boy he can't be your girlfriend." Then I asked him, "Do you have a girlfriend?" He said yes, so I asked "Who's your girlfriend?" His answer: "Mommy."

Speaking of "mommy" we have some wonderful news. We are now expecting our third child. Sometime in November, a new baby Taylor will be born. You know what this means, the stories you hear about my kids will now increase by one third. All we really need are your prayers and a little patience, because life is getting really crazy. We're going to have our own traveling three ring circuses with us at all times. Also, if you know of any good used minivans, let me know of them, please.

Now, let me get back to the sermon, the topic of which is his friendship and the love between best, best friends.

In our passage this morning, Jesus declares to his disciples that they are no longer servant, but now friends. In the ancient world, to be the high ranking slave of a great person was no cause for shame, but could in fact be a thing of pride. But, to be a friend, that was something deep and unique. Friendship was held among peers. It was a relationship of mutuality and equality. Such a relationship was both highly valued and rare in the ancient world.

In this passage, sacrifice and friendship are tied tightly together. Jesus declares that there is no greater love than to lay one's life down for one's friends. He then declares that the disciples are his friends. They now share in his ministry and work and in the advent of the kingdom. He also implores them to love as they have first been loved and chosen by him.

These words of Jesus that we read here in the Gospel of John are expansive—they don't stay put in their narrative context, but they branch out through history and over time. These are not merely words and promises to first century apostles, but they extend through the centuries all who've claimed Christ and Lord, and so these words are spoken to us as well. Jesus calls us his friends. Time and distance cannot diminish this claim.

I recently discovered the magic of a thing called Facebook. Now, I'm a relative newcomer to the site, having just set up my profile at the beginning of the year, but I have quickly fallen in love with it. We even have a couple of Fondren Presbyterian Church networks on Facebook so us Fondrenites can keep in touch with one another.

For those of you who don't have the faintest clue as to what Facebook is, I'll give you a little description: Essentially, it allows you to set up your own little website all about yourself. You can post a profile picture of yourself and post pictures of your friends and family. You can also include all sorts of information about yourself, from your favorite movies to your political and religious affiliations. You can also search through its massive database to find long lost friends and classmates, which for me is the really amazing part about it all. Through Facebook, I've been reacquainted with friends as far back as elementary school.

You know that friend that you had in the six and seventh grade who moved away and you always wondered what happened to him or her? Well, through the magic of Facebook, you may be able to find and reacquaint yourself with your long lost friend.

One thing that Facebook has taught me is that friendships don't necessarily die due to distance and time and silence. It's amazing to me how old friendships can easily be renewed, just by simply reconnecting. Now there's a whole host of other things can kill a friendship, but time and distance seem to do little damage to genuine, true friendship.

Recently, through the magic Facebook, I reconnected with a friend I had in college, Sandy. I told him of my mother's recent death, and he extended to me his many sympathies. Then he told me about his own recent experience with the death of a friend, who died of HIV / AIDS.

My friend Sandy excels at true, genuine friendship. So, out of the blue, one day he gets a call from a friend he hadn't heard from in months. Not a single conversation for months. The friend tells him that he's sick. He's dying. He has no one to help him. He needs a friend. His mother and his so-called friends—they love him, but they can't be there for him in his sickness. So Sandy goes to be with him.

Now let me say that Sandy and his friend were never partners and never lovers, just friends. Nevertheless, out of the duty and love of friendship, Sandy goes to be with his friend throughout the dying process. The friend is a 29 year old man. His mother lives far away. She loves her son, but she's worried that if she comes to take care of him, she'll get stuck with the hospital bill. His friends are still friends, I suppose, but they vanish when his illness presents itself.

But Sandy goes, everyday, to the hospital to be with his friend. He spends with him several hours a day. Sandy's friend instructs the medical staff to talk to Sandy about his condition.

When his friend gets a little better and is released from the hospital, he stays over with Sandy. There was no one else willing to take in the friend and take care of him. Sandy's one goal was to give his friend the hope that there would be at least one more tomorrow. One night Sandy realized that his friend was very confused. Sandy feared that he was falling into another coma. That night, as he packed up to leave, he told him that he loved

him, and then his heart told him to stay a little longer, and again tell him how much he loved him.

It was their last conversation together. His friend slipped into a coma that night and died peacefully a few days later.

One thing that I find so amazing about Sandy's story of friendship and love is that Sandy and his friend hadn't spoken for months before his friend became ill. In a sense, Sandy gave his life for his dying friend. So often, we think of laying one's life down for another as a literal act of dying for another. But, we may also think of it as living for another, living everyday as an act of sacrificial love for others. That's what sandy did for his friend and that is what we are called to do for each other in the name of Christ Jesus.

Only Christ calls us not to simple love our friends and family, but to love all humanity with deep compassion.

Eric Fromm in his book *The Art of Loving* writes: If I truly love one person, I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, "I love you," I must be able to say, "I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself."

Let us love one another and all people with that kind of love. Let us give our lives to one another, not in dying, but in living for each other and Christ's kingdom.

Amen.