

John 15:9-17; 21:4-14

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

January 19, 2025

Experiencing Jesus: As Friend

Each day had become a nightmare for my then 5th-grade son. He was different, and for that difference he was ostracized, made fun of, and bullied. I wrote him letters to put in his lunchbox each day so that during recess, he wouldn't feel as alone. We eventually pulled him from that school. Watching your child struggle without friends is agony — because you know how much belonging and love help people thrive.

Jesus calls his followers “friends,” a term that in ancient royal courts referred to a select group with special privileges. These friends had constant access to the king, even in his private chambers, and were consulted before military or political leaders. Jesus uses this language to convey the intimate relationship he shares with his followers, telling them, “I’ve chosen you to be that close to me.”

Who gets to be Jesus’ friend?

How did they experience it?

What is our response to it?

Who.

The short answer is anyone who wanted it, along with those who didn't. We only need to look at the first Lord's Supper. Jesus serves bread and wine to a betrayer, a denier, and a doubter. He invites all of them, and all of you, to friendship. “Everybody in!” might be the best way to describe it.

Meals reveal Jesus' radical friendship. He often broke social norms by eating with the “wrong people,” challenging the day's strict hierarchies. Rich and poor, sinners and the pious, men and women, these people didn't eat together. But Jesus, in what could be called “political acts of inclusion,” brought them together. Richard Rohr aptly notes, “Jesus' most consistent social action was eating in new ways.”

Jesus says “Let's mix it up!” When Jesus sits down to eat, pay attention, something big is about to happen. Some barrier will be crossed, some insight will be shared. Jesus brought every class of person to his table because he knew we are all bound up with one another.

As MLK said:

All of life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

Jesus invites everyone to supper, and friendship. When he makes the guest list, the first name isn't a name, it's the word "whoever." Whoever comes to me will never be turned away, will never go hungry, will never be abandoned.

Secondly, how? How did they experience friendship with Jesus?

To answer the "who" question we looked at meals.

To answer the "how" question we look at failures. That's the big test. My failures are safe with a true friend. Who are the people who have had the biggest impact on your life? I'll bet they are people who sat with you through your failure. Or, could go to you in their failure.

How did Jesus respond to failures? Fortunately for us, the "doh-disciples" failed all the time so we get pictures of it.

One of my favorite stories is from John 21, just two weeks after the resurrection. The disciples, still reeling from loss and unsure of their future, go back to fishing. Jesus appears on the shore — unrecognizable at first — and directs them to cast their net differently. They follow his instructions and bring in a miraculous catch.

And Peter recognizes Jesus. Peter, who had denied Jesus three times. You'd think Peter would want no part of talking with Jesus. That maybe he should swim away from Jesus as fast as he can. But Peter jumps into the water and swims toward Jesus. To be with his friend.

Incidentally, when Peter was just getting to know Jesus this same kind of thing fishing miracle happened. You can read about it in Luke 5. There Peter responds differently when he sees Jesus as divine. In that instance, he falls to his feet and says to Jesus "Depart from me I'm a sinful man."

But now? He knows Jesus much better now. He knows something more transformative. In Luke 5 he knew Jesus' divinity. Now, he knows his humanity. He knows Jesus is a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses. He knows he is a loved failure. That it was safe to be a failure with Jesus. It's one thing to memorize the accepted theological formulations about Jesus being God and Man, etc. But that won't make a lot of difference if I don't understand that Jesus is FOR me, even in the midst of my failure. That is transformative.

So the question becomes: Whose voices do you hear in your failure? And what are they saying? Might you hear the voice of Jesus, saying to you in the midst of your failure: "Let's talk. Let's have breakfast. I make breakfast for failures. That's what I do."

Another question: Are you the kind of person who when people fail, seek you out? Do people move toward you or away from you when they fail? Ask your spouse. Ask your friends, those close to you. Ask your kids. Hard questions I know.

And one more thing. Jesus isn't afraid of hard conversations. He is, according to the Gospel of John, full of "grace and truth." So he has an uncomfortable conversation with Peter about him denying Jesus. He asks him three times "do you love me." Grace AND Truth. That, it seems to me, are the two crucial ingredients of true friendship. Real friendship will have both.

Our Response.

First, who is welcome at your table? Who are you unintentionally excluding because you only surround yourself with easy people? Put it another way: How might you be robbing yourself of the wisdom and support you might have if you were setting a table of friendship as wide as Jesus sets his?

You want to know what is great about being a pastor? I mean, we hear a lot about how difficult it is, and it is. But one of the privileges? I have to be friends with everyone. It forces me to break out of my natural inclination to only connect with those I "click" with. Instead, I'm compelled to build friendships with everyone. And honestly, that has been such a blessing in my life.

Jesus invites us to a different kind of banquet: one where outcasts and the marginalized — the poor, disabled, and socially excluded — are welcome. It's about listening, learning, and discovering humility and empathy through connection. Prioritize the unimpressive, and be set free from your need to be impressive. Or maybe to find out your definition of impressive was exactly backward.

Second, will you forge friendships full of grace and truth? Who is that for you? Who might need you to be that for them? How will you counter the human inclination to surround yourself with people who will tell you what you want to hear?

The only real love to be found in the world is to be found when you are truly known. To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved

is perhaps our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is a lot like being loved by God. That's how we are called to befriend others.

I do believe in direct experiences with Jesus, of Divine Love. I think I've had a few. But more often than not you are going to experience Jesus through others. In Terrence Malick's film *The Tree of Life*, the character Mrs. O'Brien reflects on two approaches to life: the way of nature and the way of grace. She observes:

The nuns taught us that there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Grace doesn't try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things. They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.

Jesus loves us in the way of grace, enabling us, inviting us, to do the same with one another. Amen.