

Friends of Jesus

John 15:9-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

May 9, 2021/6th Sunday of Easter

Well, here we are again, live streaming to a mostly empty sanctuary due to the COVID situation in our province.

I am very much hoping that this is temporary and that we can resume limited in-person attendance later this May and into June.

But of course, we don't know what the future holds. If there's one thing that the last fourteen months have taught us, it is this!

I want to thank you as a church for your patience, your support, and your prayers for our church leadership as we continue to navigate this pandemic together.

I also want to add a word about Mother's Day.

I know that Mother's Day is complicated. For some, it is a time of celebration for the wonderful mothers we have or had. I would place myself firmly in this category, and I am very grateful for this. I do not take it for granted.

For others it can also be a source of pain. Those who have lost their mothers. Those who wish they could be mothers but are not. Those who have struggled or are struggling with infertility. Those who have strained relationships with their mothers.

So, I want to acknowledge the complexity of this day. We don't ever make Mother's Day the exclusive focus of a worship service at LMC for these reasons and others, not least because we try to arrange our worship according to the Christian calendar not the Hallmark calendar.

But even after all this, I also simply want to say, "Happy Mother's Day." This year, of all years, I don't want to apologize for any inclination we might have to celebrate or to be thankful.

There is no joy on earth that is not also tinged with at least *some* sadness or pain for *someone* in our orbit or for ourselves. This is how life is this side of eternity.

So, to all the mothers watching today, a very Happy Mother's Day to you. Let us give thanks for the ways in which we have been mothered well, whether by our actual mothers or those in our lives who played a similar role.

I want to begin my sermon this morning by inviting you to consider the importance of last words.

Last words matter, whether they are the last words on a death bed, a last will and testament, the last harsh words hurled in an argument, the last words of blessing and sending in a worship service.

Those of you who are parents will probably know about the importance of last words. We often call out one last set of instructions before our kids go off to school or on a trip.

- Don't forget to call home!
- Listen to your teachers!
- Don't forget your passport, your wallet, your phone!
- Be safe!
- I love you!
- I will be praying for you!

We want our last words to be the words that stay with our children as they go.

I thought of last words as I was watching Premier Jason Kenney's address on Tuesday evening. After a fairly grim, matter of fact, at times critical address where he announced more COVID restrictions with more severe punishments for offenders, he ended on a different note.

He paused, conjured up what looked like a rather plastic smile, and said:

So, let's come together. and show that we are Alberta strong, so that we can move past this terrible time to a bright Alberta summer.

It seemed to me to be a fairly radical change in tone from what preceded it.

I suspect his speech writers wanted a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down. Far better to have bright summertime images lingering in our ears than, for example \$2000 fines.

Last words matter. Or so our premier hopes, at any rate.

In the gospel of John, chapters 13-17, we encounter Jesus' last words. His last words before he leaves his disciples, last words before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

Biblical scholars call these chapters in John the "farewell discourse."

In these chapters, Jesus sits down with his closest followers for one last conversation before what he knew would be his final night with them.

It was a stressful and charged moment in the life of Jesus and his followers. Things seemed stretched to the breaking point.

Jesus had run afoul of the Jewish religious system, with all its leaders pressing heavy demands upon people, and crippling them with arcane interpretations and enforcement of the religious law.

Jesus and his followers had been harassed, misunderstood, threatened throughout his ministry.

And Jesus himself was an enigma. He spoke such strange and bracing words about giving up everything to follow him, leaving family and friends, taking up their cross, counting the cost, being prepared to die for him, etc.

Amazing things had happened through this Jesus. The disciples had witnessed miraculous signs and wonders, healings and feedings, the raising of the dead!

They had seen him challenge the religious authorities with conviction and power.

They had witnessed Jesus' example of sacrificial love and pondered his teachings on forgiveness and the inbreaking kingdom of God.

But he also spoke about dying a lot, about laying down his life for his sheep, about how he would be betrayed by those closest to him.

He wasn't easy to figure out, this Jesus.

So, our text takes place in turbulent times generally, and at a particularly turbulent time, more specifically. Jesus and his disciples are together, one last time. It is the calm before the coming storm.

And then Jesus sits down for one last long conversation with his disciples. These are his last words before leaving—the words he wants ringing in their ears once he is no longer with him.

Jesus does a number of things in these four chapters.

He talks about the importance of love and unity.

He promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit—the Advocate, the comforter—will come to them and lead them into all truth.

He prays for them—chapter 17 is the longest prayer of Jesus’ in the Bible. He asks the Father for protection and for purity and for truth, both for his disciples and for all who will come after them (i.e., us!).

He also talks a lot about peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” No matter what comes next for you, no matter what you face, I give you peace.

He tells them not be afraid. It’s amazing how often those four words show up when heaven has something to say to earth. *Do not be afraid.*

He also calls his disciples his friends. His *friends*.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a friend of Jesus?

I could be wrong, but my suspicion is that many of us do not instinctively think of our identity or our faith or our relationship to God in these terms.

It seems simultaneously too simple and too presumptuous. Could the life of faith really be as simple as being a friend of Jesus?

And who am I to call Jesus a friend? Lord, maybe. Master, Teacher, Saviour, King, Shepherd... yes, to all of the above.

But friend?

It feels... familiar, intimate, personal. And many of us are not used to thinking about God or about the life of faith in this way.

I am currently reading a book by Julia Galef called *The Scout Mindset*.¹ It's a book about how we think (and why), how we change our minds (and why), how we make decisions (and why), what we believe (and why).

Galef identifies two basic dispositions toward the world, the soldier and the scout.

The soldier's disposition is to defend what they already believe. They are often reluctant to consider different opinions, to read viewpoints that contradict their own. Their minds are made up and they tend to take on board only that which confirms and fortifies what they already think. They're very concerned to preserve the social groups that they are a part of.

The soldier's instinct is to protect and preserve.

Our world has many, many soldiers, across the political, theological, and ideological spectrum. I'm sure you know a few. Indeed, this may be your default position. I know I certainly have an inner soldier that I have to keep in check from time to time!

The scout, on the other hand, wants to map the terrain accurately. They want to know the world as it truly is and themselves as they truly are.

They're prepared to go where the evidence takes them, even if it means they have to change their minds. They're prepared to go it alone, even if it means being ostracized from communities that would prefer that they just toe the party line.

The scout is less concerned about whether facts are inconvenient or fit awkwardly in their worldview than if they're *true*.

Scouts are rarer than soldiers, according to Galef. And while she acknowledges that the soldier always has a role to play (we can't constantly live as if *nothing* is settled and *everything* is up for grabs in our world!), we should always be seeking to push our inner soldier toward a more scout-like disposition toward the world.

I agree. I think it's an important insight. I like to imagine myself as a scout, even if I know I have a few too many soldier tendencies.

But as I was reading the book this week, I was reading the gospel of John alongside it. And I wondered what Jesus might make of the soldier and the scout.

¹ Julia Galef, *The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't* (New York: Portfolio, 2021).

I think he might be a little bemused by the hubris of these metaphors because both the soldier and the scout keep *us* at the center of things.

We are the sovereign agents defending our “positions” against all who would assail us. We are the courageous mapmakers, heroically following the evidence wherever it leads.

Both metaphors make us the point of the story.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought that I would rather be a friend than a soldier *or* a scout.

The primary disposition of a friend is not to defend ideological positions nor is it to be a super sleuth in coming to an exact representation of the world.

The language of friendship is irreducibly personal. It speaks of trust and companionship.

It is a kind of keeping company with Jesus along the journey of life.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know we will be wrong about some things and right about others. We know we are biased in all kinds of ways. We know that our reasoning is motivated by all kinds of factors, some admirable, some not so much.

Yet, according to Jesus, it is not our primary task to be right about enough things about the world or about God or about ourselves.

It is not our task to defend his reputation to everyone around us (or, God help us, online! I say this acknowledging that this is where my inner soldier has been zealously active over the years!).

It is not our task to win every argument, refute every challenger, endlessly scrutinize our every motive and inclination, constantly seeking to measure up, as if life was a game where whoever dies with the most true facts in their brain wins.

Being a friend of Jesus liberates us to be what we are. Flawed, limited, and dearly loved human beings, seeking to accompany Jesus on the road of life.

Being a friend of Jesus sets us free to love the people Jesus loves, which is to say, sinners. Wasn't Jesus himself called “Friend of Sinners?” And yet, too frequently we imagine that our task is to condemn or rehabilitate sinners rather than befriend them.

Being a friend of Jesus allows us to put the soldier and the scout in their proper places.

Being a friend of Jesus is an invitation not to defend or to conquer but to abide.

Earlier, I said that we might be more comfortable with words like “Lord” and “King” and “Teacher” than “Friend” when we think about Jesus.

But even as we ponder what it means to be “friends of Jesus,” we must acknowledge that Jesus is a friend like no other.

“You are my friends if you do what I command you,” Jesus says. This likely would not fly in too many of our human friendships.

I can imagine how well it would go for me if I told one of my friends that they could keep being my friends if they did what I commanded!

Friendship with Jesus is obviously different. It is a friendship where one has the authority to set the terms of the relationship.

The one issuing the command is, after all, the incarnate Creator of the universe.

But the command is not an oppressive list of burdens and impossible to decipher regulations, as many in Jesus’ day were familiar with, and as many in our world still associate with religion.

The command is love.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends... I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another (John 15:12-13, 17).

This is our role as the friends of Jesus. To love as he commands.

Debie Thomas sums up our role in this friendship beautifully. We are to abide. She links this word to the metaphor of the vine and the branches which immediately preceded our reading this morning:

So what can I do? Where must I begin? Jesus offers a single, straightforward answer: “*Abide in my love*”... Jesus extends the metaphor of the vine and branches and calls us

once again to abide. To rest, to cling, to make ourselves at home. Not simply in him, but in his love.

My problem is that I often treat Jesus as a role model, and then despair when I can't live up to his high standards. But abiding in something is not the same as emulating it. In the vine-and-branches metaphor, **Jesus's love is not our example; it's our *source*. It's where our love originates and deepens. Where it replenishes itself. In other words, if we don't abide, we can't love.** Jesus's commandment to us is not that we wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from our own easily depleted resources. Rather, it's that we abide in the holy place where divine love becomes possible. *That we make our home* in Jesus's love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence.²

This is the task of the church. This is our heartbeat, our core identity. A community of people who demonstrate that they are the friends of God by loving as God loves.

May we abide in Christ. May we make our home in his love. May we bear fruit that will last.

May we be the friends of Jesus.

Amen.



² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3003>