

*Love As Friendship* – John 15:9-17

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When it comes to friendships, some argue that friends are the latest casualty of the lifestyle wars as we struggle to balance the many demands of our lives. With spouse, mortgage, kids, schedules, grandkids, work and managing our health, there doesn't seem to be room for much else. Friends might seem expendable, the first to neglect.

If friendships aren't the first to go, certainly life-long friendships have become more rare. We tend to shift our friends throughout our lives as our own needs and circumstances shift.

We might use the term "friend" more casually than we should. Friends are those with whom we're willing to be at least somewhat vulnerable with, those with whom we share our hopes and dreams, our fears and disappointments, the real feelings inside of us—not just those on the surface. Not everybody we know fits the definition of friend.

Most of us have many more acquaintances than friends. And acquaintances are awesome. We know them, we know their stories, we spend time with them, have fun with them. But they don't rise to the level of friend.

Typically, adults today have one or two "best" friends, four to six "close" friends, and 10 to 20 "casual" friends. Healthy friendships take time just to get going, up to three years according to some experts. Then they require nurturing and diligence.

Friendships do make a difference in our quality of life, as much as we think we can get through this life successfully without any companionship or camaraderie.

When the medical community chimes in, the value of friendships is dramatically underscored. Fewer friends lead to higher stress, more isolation, and a shorter life. In a study of 2,800 men and women over the age of 65, those with more friends had a lower risk

of health problems, and they recovered faster when they did develop them. A Yale University study of 10,000 seniors showed that having friends reduced the risk of death by about 50 percent over a five-year period. Friends can help you reduce stress, improve the quality of your life, live longer, get a better job, expand your business, improve your marriage and derive more joy from your life.

Jesus himself was a strong advocate for friendships. With his disciples, he developed not only a following but a strong bond of fellowship and camaraderie with the guys he calls in this Gospel text “friends.”

In this address to them, he clarifies this relationship with them. And it is here that we see a bit of a shift. No longer does he call them servants, but friends. There is an openness about their relationship, one of great communication and trust. The master-servant relationship has matured into a friendship between men. There’s a leveling between them, a coming together as equals somewhat.

Such is the nature of great friendships: there is no guarding or pretension on the part of friends. Good friends are free to truly be themselves around each other because they know they can trust one another and not fear embarrassment or betrayal.

The best friendships are with those whom we know we don’t have to impress. We don’t have to worry about them trying to be somebody they are not around us, and we can be who we truly are around them. And in that spirit of honesty and openness, there is real relationship and support.

When we have those kinds of friendships, there is love. And when there is that kind of love, it’s amazing how the words, “I love you” seem to flow freely.

One of my mentors from seminary 25 years ago would regularly tell me he loved me. That can be awkward for one man to say to another in the context of a friendship. But John had no reservation about voicing that and I had no reservation about saying it back.

John now battles dementia, and every year when I give a gift to the seminary in his honor, his twin brother writes me a note to say thanks and give me an update on John's condition. I write back and ask him to tell John that I love him.

Genuine brotherly or sisterly love can evolve out of close friendships.

As much as Jesus longed to have this kind of loving friendship with his disciples, he longs to have that kind of relationship with us, too. He has made known to us as well all that he heard from his heavenly Father and because of that full disclosure—a disclosure involving God's love and mercy and forgiveness—he calls us friends as well.

And because Jesus calls us friends, he desires no pretenses from us. He doesn't need from us any kind of façade that shields our true nature. He doesn't only want to see our best sides, he wants to see all of our sides and everything that exists underneath in the depths of our hearts and minds.

This friend that we have in Jesus wants to see the real men and women who long to be his friend, too. In all our ugliness and beauty, he wants to see us in totality. Because only in the revelation of our total selves will we find the same trust and support we receive from earthly friends who accept us for who we truly are.

Rob and Kristen Bell wrote a book called *The Zimzum of Love*.

*Zimzum* is a term derived from Jewish mysticism. It describes the space between two people, the emptiness into which each one enters, tentatively, then backs off, in the ebb and flow of giving and receiving love.

The authors describe three stages of drawing closer to the one we love, of becoming more committed. The three stages are: *spark*, *substance* and *sacrifice*.

Spark is what first appears in those beautiful, early days of a romantic relationship: the feeling of joy, even ecstasy, at simply being in the presence of that special someone. We hardly need to say more about that, because it's all over the entertainment media: the movies,

the TV shows, the romantic novels.

The relationship matures, over years. In the *zimzum*, the ceaseless back-and-forth dance, the two lovers weave a different quality of relationship. The spark is still there, but even more wonderful than that is the growing *substance* -- a solid relationship that's more like having a best friend, the ease and comfort in one another's presence, the building together of a home eventually. There's something there, something real, something trustworthy and lasting.

Far rarer -- and far more precious -- is the third stage: *sacrifice*. It's not something anyone looks for, nor desires. Often it's associated with significant loss, even pain. Something happens: something bad, something unforeseen. The beloved is at risk. Yet, because of the love, the sacrifice is simply what one *has* to do; and one offers it to the beloved out of abiding joy, a joy so deep it issues, not in laughter, but in sighs and even tears.

When it comes to great friendships, it's the final two elements described in the book — substance and sacrifice — that cement the lasting bond of friendship. The ease of being with each other, the freedom to be our true selves with each other, and the willingness to sacrifice for the other to some degree make these relationships stick.

That's what Jesus was moving toward with his disciples. "I no longer call you servants but friends."

This friend is a real friend — a friend who is beside us every day of our lives.

Good friends are like a pair that doesn't get separated from each other.

Speaking of pairs that go side by side with each other, we often, in doing laundry, lament that a sock goes missing from its mate, right? Yeah, happens regularly it seems.

Did you know that if you lose a sock in the dryer it will actually return in the form of a missing Tupperware lid that won't fit any of your containers? Yeah, true story.

We need more of those pairs that match.

We need more community. And within our community, hopefully, are a whole host of acquaintances—people we know, like, appreciate, and share values and interests with. And then, at another level, are our friends. There's substance and sacrifice there that goes beyond the level of acquaintance.

It reflected the love Jesus had for the disciples and the love he has for us too.