

Christmas: Connecting With Friends
John 15:7-17, Psalm 15 (Voices United 736)

Christmas offers each of us a wonderful opportunity to get connected -- or reconnected -- in a fresh way with ourselves, with family, with God and with friends. This past week I had the occasion to reconnect with a friend. He had received our annual Christmas card and letter in the mail and so picked up the phone and called. We don't see each other very often because of distance and other circumstances but, as we talked, I was reminded again of the depth of our friendship. He shared some of his ongoing personal struggles (of which I was aware) and some current joys he was experiencing. I found myself spontaneously praying for him and his wife over the phone and, together, we rejoiced in that kind of connection in our friendship.

To whom are you a friend? How would you describe a friend? Here are a few descriptions I found recently:

“A true friend is someone who thinks you are a good egg even though your friend knows you are slightly cracked.”

I read this one on a coffee mug: “Good friends are like good coffee. Sometimes they make you nervous but usually they are great.”

“You can always tell a real friend: when you've made a fool of yourself your friend doesn't feel you've done a permanent job.”

Here is a Sicilian proverb: “Only your real friends will tell you when your face is dirty.”

“Your friend is the one who knows all about you and still likes you.”

“A friend hears the song in my heart and sings it to me when my memory fails.”

And “While everybody else shakes your hand, a friend holds it.”

I believe there comes a point in our lives when we realize who really matters to us and who will always matter. The one who really matters is a true friend. Now, think about this: Who do you think Jesus would call a friend? Not a fair-weather friend but a true friend -- someone for whom Jesus really matters.

So who did Jesus call a true friend? John 15 gives a direct answer to that question. Jesus said in verse 14: “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Now most people don't want to base their friendship with someone on being told what to do! And for sure our spouses are not interested in that kind of relationship! So I am glad Jesus made a clear connection to love in verse 12. “My commandment,” said Jesus, “is this: love one another, just as I love you.” Being friends with Jesus is linked fundamentally with love for him – and also love for one another. Jesus said this love is similar to the way he loved his disciples -- just as he loves us today. In fact, the deepest kind of love is when you are willing to risk everything and give your life for your friends as Jesus said in verse 13. As *The Message Bible* puts it: “The very best way to love

is to put your life on the line for your friends.” We might do that in a variety of ways. But that is the way Jesus literally put his love into action – he gave his life literally for *anyone* and for *whoever* would choose to be his friends too.

Jesus said something else about being friends with us. In verse 15, he said to his disciples: “I call you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” That is remarkable in my thinking. There was a unique intimacy between Jesus and God the Father. Jesus affectionately called God “Abba.” Abba is a delightful sounding word. It means something like our word “Papa.” It has a family intimacy about it. Jesus said he no longer called his disciples servants because, as he told them, “servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning.” They merely do as they are told without any significant interaction. For Jesus, however, his relationship of love with his disciples meant calling them “friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from the Father.” In other words, Jesus’ friends were also to be part of that intimacy – that relationship of love Jesus had with God the Father. Remember the prayer Jesus taught his disciples? We are to call God “Our Father” too!

So what did Jesus hear from his Father who is also our Father? When I read through the Gospels and also the whole of the 15th chapter of John, I hear the following.

One part of Jesus’ conversation is this: If we are closely connected with Jesus (like the branch that takes its life from the tree), then deep joy – the joy of God -- will become our deep joy too. In verse 11, Jesus said, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” -- or full or real.

I believe Jesus wants us to understand the intimate connection we are meant to have with him. He called himself the vine and us the branches in the vine in the first six verses of John 15. Deep joy, he said, will result from that connection with him – that’s his promise. Prolific English author G. K. Chesterton called this joy “the gigantic secret of Christians.” And this joy is linked to living in the love of Jesus and acting out that love with each other.

In this Christmas season, many families will no doubt pop *It’s a Wonderful Life* into their DVD or Blue-Ray players. That movie celebrates one man’s extraordinary generosity. George Bailey -- proprietor of a building and loan institution -- demonstrated compassion, hope and trust in others even when adversity struck them.

But for George, trouble began when his absent-minded Uncle Billy misplaced \$8,000. It could have resulted in the business being taken over and George going to jail for his uncle’s mistake. George was in such despair, he thought about suicide and wished he’d never been born. But then an angel, Clarence Oddbody, was dispatched from heaven to show George what the world would have been like had he never been born. After a variety of events, George discovered that, despite his financial woes, he was a wealthy man because of the investments he had made all his life in other people.

When George returned to the real world, he was grateful to be alive. As he entered the front door of his home, he saw the bank examiner and the sheriff waiting for him. He hugged and

kissed his children and his wife, Mary. “You have no idea what happened to me,” he said to her.

Mary responded, “You have no idea what happened while you were gone.”

Suddenly they heard a great commotion outside and the door opened. Absent-minded Uncle Billy was first to enter, carrying a wicker basket filled with cash. He dumped it all on a table in front of George and explained: “Mary told some people you were in trouble, and they scattered all over town collecting money. People didn't ask any questions. They just wanted to help.”

Others then filed into the living room and piled more money on the table – enough to more than cover George's debt. With tears rolling down his cheeks, George discovered a gift from Clarence, the angel – a book inscribed with the words “No man is a failure who has friends.”

In this classic fictional Christmas story, George Bailey put his life on the line for his friends and in return he discovered deep joy. My friends, his story is a mere hint of the true joy we can experience when we are friends of Jesus who put his life on the line for us.

Another part of Jesus' conversation with his Father involved the following: If we are closely connected with Jesus (like the branch that takes its life from the tree), then we may speak honestly with God even in the darkness of our situation and even when we think God is nowhere to be found and has forsaken us. That is part of the context of John chapters 13-19 for John 15.

The movie title *It's a Wonderful Life* is intriguing, isn't it? If you have seen the movie, you know life is not all wonderful. There is a dark side. And there is a dark side to the Christmas story.

That first Christmas was a time of humiliation, pain, fear and danger. In that culture, it would have been shameful for Joseph to be engaged to a pregnant Mary before they were officially married. It would not have been easy either for Mary, in the later stage of her pregnancy, to travel the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem by donkey over rough roads. (Think about it!) It must have been a frightening experience too to leave family and friends and escape in a hurry to a foreign country because their baby was being hunted down to be killed. If I were to paint a picture of these events, I would draw a faint cross in the background over Mary, Joseph and Jesus. And I think you may agree with me as well that, as in that little family, very few people do not experience darkness and pain in this life.

Christmas is an opportunity for us to stare into the face of God's love and recognize the incredible depths to which God has gone to make his loving grace and redemptive love real to the world. So in Jesus, God has moved into our human neighbourhood as a human baby involved in every aspect of humanity – in the good, the bad and the ugly. So Jesus understands, more than we will ever know, the dark side of our human existence.

Being a true friend means we acknowledge difficulty, pain and suffering when we encounter it in someone else and even in our own personal circumstances. Being a true friend means we identify with each other's pain.

Two men were casual neighbours. They did the neighbourly things like borrowing each other's tools and lawn mowers – the ordinary kind of stuff. Then one man's wife was stricken with cancer and died within three months. Here is part of a letter he wrote afterward:

“I was in total despair. I went through the funeral preparations and the service like I was in a trance. After the service I went to the path along the river and walked all night. But I didn't walk alone. My neighbour -- afraid for me, I guess -- stayed with me all night. He didn't speak; he didn't even walk beside me. He just followed me. When the sun finally came up over the river, he came over and said, ‘Let's go get some breakfast.’

“I go to church now... A religion that can produce the kind of caring and love my neighbour showed me is something I want to find out more about. I want to love and be loved like that for the rest of my life.”

One more part of Jesus' conversation with his Father was this: If we are closely linked with Jesus (like the branch that takes its life from the tree), then he promises we will experience God's deep love in our lives – God's deep love for us and God's deep love for others.

When Jesus calls us friends, his friendship means we can experience a similar love with God that Jesus had with God the Father. Here is what Jesus said in verses 9 and 10 of John 15 in *The Message Bible*:

“I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done -- kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love.”

Minister and author Kent Hughes tells the following story about a friend of his wife:

After an unusually tiring several years of missionary service, she and her family moved into a beautiful place of their own -- a new, large townhouse-styled apartment with a patio. She loved that patio.

After a few months some new neighbours moved in. Unfortunately, they were highly upsetting people. They played loud music day and night along with a constant flow of obscenities.... They totally disrupted her peace. She could see nothing good in them.

She asked God to help her be more loving, but all she got back [from her neighbours] was disgust and rejection. The crisis came when she discovered that her neighbours' children had sprayed orange paint all over her beautiful patio -- the walls, the floors -- everything! She was distraught and furious. She tried to pray but found herself crying out, “I cannot love them! I hate them!”

Knowing she had to deal with this hatred, [she began to have a personal conversation with God]. She asked God, “How do I love them?” The only way she could picture it was like putting on a coat. So she chose to wrap herself in the love of God! As a result she began to experience a deeper life of Christ within her.

She made a list of what she would do if she really loved her exasperating neighbours. Then she did what she had listed. She baked cookies. She offered to babysit for free. She invited the mother over for coffee... And in doing these things she began to know and understand them. She began to see that they were living under tremendous pressures. She began to love her “enemies.” She did good to them without expecting anything back.

The day came when they moved from the neighbourhood -- and she wept! Not because they were leaving but because she had come to love them. She felt that the love of Jesus Christ had captured her and made [his] home in her life.

My friends, here is God’s good news for all humanity. You and I have been invited by Jesus Christ to make ourselves at home in his love and in the love of his Father – God! -- who is also our Father. Christmas offers us the opportunity to connect, or reconnect, not only with our friends but also with Jesus Christ – with God -- as our Friend.

May this be so for you and for me.

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