
STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

I remember how excited I felt when I first read in John 15:14 when Jesus said to his disciples, "You are my friends." It made sense. Jesus and his disciples were bonded by their shared mission as well as by virtually living together during Jesus' three years of ministry. Even after Jesus went back to heaven, the disciples continued in friendship and expanded their circle of 12 to include others who had surrounded Jesus during his ministry. And when Thomas struggled with doubts about Jesus' identity, that circle of friends stuck with him. They also hung in with Peter when, just following Jesus' resurrection victory, he decided to go back to fishing. These all were friends of Jesus, not only his followers.

Then I read on through John's account of Jesus' last supper with his friends and his prayer after they left the upper room, and what I discovered has changed my life. As Jesus was talking to his Father, he expanded his requests beyond the small circle of friends we call the disciples toward the ever widening circle of "all those who will believe in me through their message." When Jesus was still on earth, he prayed for me. He included me in the circle of those he called friends.

A Primer on Friendship

What does it mean to be a friend of the Lord of Holy Week? Jesus described the meaning that last night he was with his disciples when he said,

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no

man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another. (John 15:12-17 RSV)

Jesus offered his disciples four ways to understand and to test their friendship with him; he proved his friendship to his disciples — and us — in two ways; and he asked his disciples to prove their friendship to him in two ways.

As we might expect, Jesus made the first gesture of friendship by saying, "I have loved you." He went on to foreshadow the depth and extent of his love: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." What people give to us of themselves is the timeless test of all friendships. Most of us naturally appraise our friends by that standard. Recall the last time you asked someone to do you a favor or get you out of a tight spot. You probably didn't choose a mere acquaintance — someone you knew in passing at church, office, the

golf course, the civic club. Most of us instinctively guide ourselves by the unwritten agreement not to expect causal friends to put themselves out on our account.

On the other hand, if we are fortunate, we have one or two close friends who would give us the shirts off their backs for us, and we know that we could ask anything of them. That is the kind of friendship Jesus offers his disciples—"I'll give my life for you because you are my friends" Twenty centuries later his offer still stands. We are included among the friends for who Jesus gives up his life.

Long Talks on the Front Porch

The second test of his friendship Jesus proposed was the test of communication — "I have told you everything." Jesus reminded his disciples that he shared confidences with them as only intimate friends experience. He spent hours at a time talking with them, telling them news of the Father, things he wouldn't share with an acquaintance or a servant in the house—the kind of stories and information only close friends love to hear.

Have you ever experienced that split second when you are forced to frankly evaluate a so-called friendship? Like that awkward moment at a bus stop when out of the corner of your eye you recognize an acquaintance in a crowd of fellow commuters, it's a moment of social crisis. If you acknowledge your friend, she might want to sit by you and visit during the 30-minute commute. And you were planning to use the time to write an exam, review your notes for a meeting that morning, or just read the paper. How you choose to acknowledge that person proves the depth of

your friendship. In that critical moment you find out how much a person means to you. Good friends usually disregard paperwork in favor of catching up with each other, while an acquaintance receives at best a curt nod, at worst a cold shoulder. The friendship of Jesus means he thinks talking to us is the most important thing he could be doing.

Jesus spoke of two other proofs of our friendship with him, actions on our part that test our steadfastness in the friendship. He tells us that we are his friends when we do what he commands us. When I first read these words, I thought that, to be friends with Jesus, one had to obey the full range of commands given in the entire Bible. But rather than focusing on all the rules of discipleship, in John 15 Jesus refers to the one great commandment that he begins and ends the paragraph with: that we love each other.

Want It? Take It!

After meditating on the meaning of this commandment, I pictured love as Jesus' prized possession entrusted to us—but to give away, not keep. Imagine taking a walking tour of a grand estate. The tour guide leads you through a Japanese garden, through a grove of fruit trees, to the massive front doors of a mansion. Room by room he describes the priceless antiques and paintings, guiding you through French Provincial hallways and Greco-Roman sitting rooms. Now imagine a breath-taking vase on a gilded end table. "I've never seen anything like this exquisite vase," you say to the tour guide.

Good friends usually disregard paperwork in favor of catching up with each other, while an acquaintance receives at best a curt nod.

"Do you really like that vase?" he queries. "It's the most beautiful porcelain piece I've seen." To your amazement he replies, "Then it is yours. The owner of this house is a close friend of mine, and I know he would want you to have that vase. Please, accept this vase, and we'll take it to the gift shop where they will wrap it for you."

Now picture Jesus as the owner of the mansion and us as the guides. It is as if Jesus said, "You will prove that you are indeed my friends if you give away the best treasures of my estate; and of every valuable possession that is mine, my love is the most precious." When we share Christ's love we prove inwardly and outwardly that we ourselves are experiencing God's love, and in that sharing we are assured that we are the friends of Jesus.

Martin Luther observed this principle in the Lord's prayer. Jesus told his disciples to ask God's forgiveness for their trespasses—and for those who had trespassed against them. Luther believed that Jesus instructed us to pray this way because our willingness to forgive is concrete assurance of God's love for us. We prove we are Jesus' friends by extravagantly giving

away Christ's best treasure as if there were an endless supply. And there is!

As the final test of friendship, Jesus invited his disciples to pray to the Father in his name "so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you." He invites us to pray what is on our hearts with the same openness and shamelessness that accompany the requests and questions between friends. Prayer is essentially the miraculously free and privileged language of friendship—a friendship that has taken the whole world by surprise. ♦



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