

I Have Called You Friends (Part II): Friendship with Others

In Part I of this series, I reflected upon Jesus' line, "I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15). I considered this as an invitation to divine intimacy (see the Sept. 6 bulletin). That particular element of Jesus' line sounds rather consoling. And it should be consoling because it is consoling. But there's a rather uncomfortable element as well, because friendship with God isn't a purely private affair. It's not exclusively vertical (God and me, me and God), but it has a horizontal element as well. And, because friendship with God involves other people, it's a rather challenging thing.

Let's look closely at what Jesus says in John 15. Here's the consoling line again: "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father" (v. 15).

Note the divine intimacy, which really comes out in Jesus telling us everything he's heard from his intimate relationship with the Father. But if we read one verse prior, we see this less-than-comfortable line: "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (v. 14).

In other words, there's a condition. We remain his friends by doing what he commands. What? I thought God loved us unconditionally?

He does. God loves us. That's the foundation. That's the given. But we can remove ourselves from his love; we can turn our backs on his offer of friendship by not doing what he commands. This is implied in v. 10: "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love." Keeping the commandments = remaining within loving friendship with God. Not keeping the commandments = falling out of friendship with God. Sounds a lot like vows, right?! Relationships depend on fidelity.

Okay, what does God command his friends to do? "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (v. 12–13). (Gulp!)

To remain in friendship with God (vertical element), we are to love one another (horizontal element) as he has loved us. How has he loved us? Well, he loved us to the extent of laying down his life for us, even when we had fallen out of friendship with him (see Rom 5:6–8).

What started out so consoling has become rather uncomfortable, because accepting Jesus' friends as our own can be difficult or even feel impossible at times. The Gospel is uncomfortably consoling, and these verses in John 15:1–17 are case in point.

On our own, loving others as he has loved us is, in fact, impossible. Some people are difficult to love, and plenty of people annoy us. If we're really honest with ourselves, there are some people we probably think are 100% unlovable or not worthy of the attempt, so filled are our hearts with contempt sometimes. Yet Jesus says, "love one another as I love you." Impossible! This is the point of Christianity. Loving perfectly is the call, and in our fallen humanity, it is impossible.

But not so fast. With God, all things are possible (cf. Matt 19:26). If we can open our own hearts to God's charity, his love for us, and begin to love our own selves in light of that love — if I can accept myself as one loved, uniquely, by God — then I can love even the most despicable person. Again, I'm not talking about my own love, or ability to love. My own love is often blind and wrongheaded and even selfish. No. Not with my own love, but with God's love. If God has said "yes" to me, and he's said "yes" to my enemy, then, if I can surrender resentment and forgive, I can participate in his "yes," too. If I can let go of my self-centeredness, then I can love my enemy, too. In this way, and only in this way, can I love others as he has loved them.

I'd like to close with a meditation from Ven. Madeleine Delbrel that perfectly illustrates this uncomfortably consoling scenario that comes to us in John 15:

"Lord, Lord, at least let this rind that covers me not be a barrier to you. Pass through. My eyes, my hands, my mouth are yours. This woman so sad before me: here is my mouth so that you can smile at her. This child is almost gray; he is so pale: here are my eyes so that you can look upon him. This man so tired, so very tired, here is my whole body so that you can give him my seat, and my voice so that you can say very gently to him: 'Sit down.' This boy, so smug, so foolish, so tough, here is my heart for you to love him with, harder than he has ever been loved" (Delbr l, *The Holiness of Ordinary People*, 82).

We must simply surrender. No biggie. Just let go and let him love others through you. That's all. And that's consolingly uncomfortable.



Brad Bursa
Director of Evangelization