

John 15:9-17

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so also I have loved you. Remain in my love. ¹⁰If you hold on to my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have held on to my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you these things so that my joy would continue to be in you and that your joy would be complete.

¹²“This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you continue to do the things I instruct you. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because everything that I heard from my Father, I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will endure, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷These things I am instructing you, so that you love one another.”

“You Are My Friends”

I.

The one feigning friendship with Jesus had already left their number. Maundy Thursday evening, when the disciples were in the festival hall celebrating the Passover, Jesus announced to his disciples: “Amen, Amen, I tell you: One of you will betray me” (John 13:21, EHV). A few minutes later, Judas took the piece of bread Jesus said would identify the one who would betray him, and left the hall.

Certainly one incident none of them really understood wasn’t going to dampen the mood of the Passover celebration. Sure, Jesus said that the one he identified would betray him, but how serious was *that* likely to be, anyway? The *rest* of them would *never* betray Jesus, or deny him, or run away from him when danger threatened. There, in the safety of the four walls and in the company of people who all agreed with him, Peter confidently asserted: “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!” (John 13:37, EHV). Matthew adds: “All the disciples said the same” (Matthew 26:35, EHV). Ah, friendship. How easy it is to declare friendship in the safety of friends, in the comfort of a setting in which there are no real challenges or threats.

After Judas had left and after Peter professed, Jesus continued to teach his disciples. He said to them: “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, and do not let it be afraid” (John 14:27, EHV). Peace to you, disciples. Don’t let fear overcome and trouble your heart. Things aren’t going to look very good soon, but don’t let your hearts be troubled, there is a higher purpose to all that is about to happen.

Just before last week’s Gospel reading, Jesus had said: “Get up. Let’s leave this place” (John 14:31, EHV). That’s when they began the trek toward the Garden of Gethsemane. In that lesson last week Jesus told the disciples how critical it was for them to remain in him, the Vine, for their nourishment, and for their ability to produce fruit, as he was telling them to do.

Without missing a beat, Jesus speaks about love and friendship. “As the Father has loved me, so also I have loved you” (John 15:9, EHV). The Father’s love is a perfect love.

Yesterday in the Examination service, you Confirmands stated that the simplest summary of God's Law is love. When he gave his Ten Commandments, God first of all expressed his love for you and me because it is only in *his* love that *we* have any desire or ability to keep those Commandments. Jesus reiterates that here.

Oh, how the disciples' friendship would be tested! Oh, how they failed in their love and support of Jesus, who loved them without measure and without counting the cost!

II.

Just as Peter did, this year's Confirmands—as well as the rest of us here who have been confirmed in the faith—have pledged their undying friendship and love for the Lord Jesus. Within the sheltering comfort of these walls, and in the presence of all these friends in the faith in the church, it's easy to pledge your undying love and support and friendship of Jesus.

How will your love show itself when it is challenged? When Judas came to betray Jesus with a company of soldiers backing him up, the disciples stood their ground—for a moment. Peter even began to follow through on his previous claim of having a willingness to die for Jesus by taking out his sword and slashing around wildly, cutting off the ear of one of the soldiers. But after that brief moment of bravery, *all* the disciples turned tail and ran. Their blustery bravado was gone in the face of a real test of friendship.

Later, as they thought about things, they wanted to find out what was going on with the One who had identified them as friends. They followed along to the judgment hall to get a peek at the proceedings. Even after hours of deliberating about his previous actions, Peter didn't have the guts to mention his friendship with Jesus to a humble servant-girl, let alone give a witness before thousands in a hostile crowd. Just as Jesus had predicted would happen, three times Peter denied ever knowing Jesus.

Beyond these walls there is hatred and persecution of Christians. Will *you* allow yourself to be known as a friend of Jesus when it is uncomfortable? Out there, beyond these walls, friends are difficult to keep and relationships are fragile. Will you take the chance of declaring your friendship with Jesus if it means putting those *other* friendships on shaky ground?

III.

The nerve-shattering operation began almost 50 years ago—May 13, 1969, to be exact. A medic named Jim joined a squad of soldiers in Vietnam. They came in via helicopter to a hot LZ—a landing zone where they were being shot at as soon as they came in for landing. Two of the choppers were shot down over the LZ. Jim immediately noticed a man who was too wounded to move, and ran to get him, disregarding his own personal safety. Under covering fire, Jim rescued at least two more men before being wounded himself by shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade. After being wounded, he rescued four more men from the kill zone that day.

When the first choppers came to evacuate the wounded, Jim refused to leave. "You're going to need me," he told his commander. The next day, the unit's only other medic was killed in action.

During the course of three days of intense action, Jim saved the lives of at least 10 men, running through crossfire to get them and bring them back to safety. Besides rescuing the 10 from certain death by his disregard for his own personal safety, Jim treated the wounds of countless others. Finally, on day three of this harrowing experience, the unit was evacuated from the area.

In 2017, 48 years after the experience, James McCloughan, a retired teacher from South Haven, Michigan, was awarded our nation's highest award for valor—the Medal of Honor. (Information about James McCloughan taken from <https://wapo.st/2JQTXcq>, <https://bit.ly/2HR1vew> and <https://youtu.be/2hnjQ9bxKVM>.)

“No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends,” says Jesus (John 15:13, EHV). James McCloughan didn't give up his life for his friends, but he certainly showed a willingness to do so, again and again.

Jesus didn't just show a *willingness* to give up his life for his friends, he *did* it. He laid down his life on the cross. He paid for the lack of love and friendship we so often display.

Jesus said very explicitly to the Eleven: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because everything that I heard from my Father, I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:15-16, EHV). It was important these disciples know that Jesus—their Master—had *chosen* them as friends. It was so important because he knew that mere hours later they would act as anything *but* friends to him. They needed his reassurance, even before it happened, that he *chose* them, in spite of everything. Not only did he choose them, he was willing to lay down his life for them.

He has done the same for you Confirmands, and for all of us who have been confirmed in the faith. In fact, he has laid down his life for the whole world—even for those who reject his overtures of friendship. But to you and me—to Christians—he says: “I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will endure” (John 15:16, EHV).

IV.

Jesus' command remains in place for you and me for the rest of our lives: “These things I am instructing you, so that you love one another” (John 15:17, EHV). The world will stay the same. There will always be hatred and betrayal and rejection. You and I are different. We become more loving because we are Jesus' friends.

Remain in the love of Jesus. Do that by gladly hearing and learning his Word often—at worship services at church, and in Bible study, and in your own personal studies and devotions at home. Remain in the love of Jesus by receiving often the evidence of his love—the very body and blood he gave in sacrifice for his friends, given and poured out for you in, with, and under the bread and wine of his Supper.

Strengthened and nourished by his love for you, *you* will grow in your ability to show the friendship of Jesus to others as you love one another. You are his friends. Live as his friends, as you are about to pledge in your Confirmation Vows, for the rest of your lives. Amen.