

Easter 6 B
John 15:9-17
May 5, 2024

“The Cookie of Life”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

“As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God’s commandments and abide in their love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from God. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

~o~

As you can see, dear friends, today we have yet another lectionary text on love. In case you ever doubted the importance of the subject to the authors of scripture, or to Jesus himself, you can safely lay those doubts to rest. It is a big deal to him, to them, to the biblical witness as a whole. There’s no avoiding it and it’s been the subject of my last two sermons. One of the challenges of preaching about love is that it is easily talked about and far less easily lived out. It’s also one of those amorphic topics that can be hard to pin down, especially as it applies to people and groups on opposite sides of the world or politics and ideologies on the opposite end of the spectrum. The noun “love” is loved by all, but the verb “love” really is a struggle for all.

Today, though, I'd like to talk about love as it relates to friendship. Novelist Salman Rushdie once said that, "In the cookie of life, friends are the chocolate chips." As far as I'm concerned, cookies *need* chocolate chips and people need friends. This is not a new concept.

Baylor University's Dr. Michael Kauth reminds us that,

cooperative alliances [are] generally adaptive and sometimes more than reciprocal cooperation. Close friendships in particular are often unequal in many ways. Friendships are special, cooperative relationships defined by liking and affection.¹

Friendships serve a functional purpose, but go beyond function, and always have. Think of the biblical examples of David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi; historical examples of Alexander the Great and Hephaestion or Rumi and Shams; or pop-culture examples like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, *The Color Purple's* Nettie and Celie, or *Golden Girls* Blanche, Dorothy, Rose, and Sophia. Each of these relationships were special; served a functional purpose; but went beyond function to liking and affection.

Kauth states that, "Quite possibly, our strong desire for close friends evolved among our early ancestors because having a close friend improved one's chances of survival and the survival of one's children."² While that doesn't tell the whole story of friendship in the modern world, I think that it's fairly universal to claim that we do need relationships with others to thrive. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says it this way:

Our relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and community members can have a major impact on our health and well-being. When people are socially connected and have stable and supportive

¹ Michael Kauth. "How we got here: The origin and function of friendship," Bcm.edu, March 29, 2021: <https://blogs.bcm.edu/2021/03/29/how-we-got-here-the-origin-and-function-of-friendship/>.

² Ibid.

relationships, they are more likely to make healthy choices and to have better mental and physical health outcomes. They are also better able to cope with hard times, stress, anxiety, and depression.³

Even Jesus needed friends, albeit carefully chosen ones. The portion of scripture that is appointed for today comes from Jesus' Farewell Discourse. This episode begins with the sharing of Passover, Jesus washing the disciples' feet, and his identification of Judas as the betrayer. Once Judas departs, the discourse begins.

After the deeply intimate and humbling act of foot washing, Jesus engages in a heart-felt conversation with his most intimate companions. Repeatedly, he urges them to love one another, to abide in his love, and to be assured of God's love. These were his friends and he loved them, wanted them to love one another, wanted them to know they were loved by God. Friendship is a form of love in action and it's as much about making sure that the other person feels loved as it is about feeling it ourselves. Aristotle sheds a little light on this last point.

Writing nearly 400 years before Jesus birth, Aristotle is one of the earliest philosophers to write about the nature of friendship. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he articulates three distinct types of friendship: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and friendship of virtue. Friendships of utility and of pleasure are ultimately self-serving. This does not make them bad. Just usually short-lived and of limited scope. Friendships of virtue, by contrast, are founded on love for the other and mutual goodwill. The person is loved by the other for their own sake and good is desired for them. These friendships are what Aristotle calls "perfect friendship" and these are ultimately the friendships that last.⁴ It's Jesus desire that his friends feel loved, even as he is loved, that makes theirs an example of Aristotle's "perfect friendship."

³ "How Does Social Connectedness Affect Health?" Cdc.gov, March 30, 2023:
<https://www.cdc.gov/emotional-wellbeing/social-connectedness/affect-health.htm>.

⁴ Aristotle, trans. W.D. Ross. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Classics.mit.edu:
<https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.8.viii.html>.

We've all heard the old adage that if you want a good friend you have to be a good friend. It's true: the deepest and longest lasting relationships are those in which both parties are loved for who they are and both really, truly want the best for the other. That's what separates friendships of utility and pleasure from the deeper friendship of virtue. And the truth is, this last category of friendship is a rare thing.

We all need friends and we all need all kinds of friends. As we nurture the relationships in our own lives, it's worth asking ourselves what we're hoping to get out of a given relationship and then asking if that's what we're putting into it.

And so, in the words of John O'Donohue:

May you be blessed with good friends.

May you treasure your friends.

May you be good to them and may you be there for them;
may they bring you all the blessing, challenges, truth,
and light that you need for your journey.⁵

Amen.

⁵ John O'Donohue. *Anam Cara*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2022.