

John 15:9-17 (NRSV)

As the Father 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 my Father's commandments and abide in his 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 my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

In a couple of weeks, we'll confirm 14 young people as adult voting members of the congregation. Now that I've been here for a few years, I'm realizing that one of the joys of being a pastor or being a long-term member of a congregation is being able to watch young people grow up and become adults. Many of you in the congregation have been here for many more years than I have been and I can only imagine what you're thinking and will be thinking on the 31st. If you're anything like me you must be very proud.

Now, as young people grow up, it's important for us to recognize that we need to relate to them differently. As I said in the children's sermon, I knew Alyson and Lara before they were old enough to **be** an acolyte and now they are the leaders of them. Some grownups have some trouble making that transition and still think of them as children. I know my children will always be my babies, but I

know, too, that they are getting ready to have children of their own, that they are well into beginning their adult lives and I'm very glad they are doing a good job at it.

But let's say that we really want to recognize that our children, our confirmands are growing up and that we want to tell them that we love them as they grow and change, that we love who they are becoming and that we want to stay close to them as they grow. How do we do that?

Well, one way is to recognize that they and we are both becoming disciples. "Disciple" of course, literally means "student" and that's fair because they and we are both students, both learning to be children of God. Neither of us is perfect yet – I think in lots of respects, some of the confirmands are better students, better disciples than I am – but we're none of us perfect. So, they and we grownups are disciples, or disciples in training. But, what are we to each other?

Jesus gives us a little advice in today's Gospel lesson – he calls his disciples "friends." He says, "I call you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." When Jesus wants to indicate that his disciples reached a level of maturity, he calls them his friends.

Now, we don't generally think of "friends" as a sacred kind of relationship. We often say things like, "We're just friends," when we want to say that we aren't really close to someone else. "Can't we just be friends?" we ask, when we don't want to get more involved with someone else. I have about 200 friends on Facebook – some of them are very dear to me, people I have pledged an important part of my life to, but others are people who I've never met outside of Facebook and I doubt I ever will. Are all of these friends in the way that Jesus is talking about it?

We get a clue that Jesus has something a little deeper in mind when he says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's

life for one's friends." To lay down one's life for a friend. These are clearly special friends. I don't expect to lay down my life for my Facebook acquaintances.

A couple of weeks ago we talked about metaphorical language for God and for Jesus: God as the True Vine, Jesus as the Good Shepherd and so on. We said that the metaphor of God or Jesus as friend was an attractive one. That's true, but only if we reclaim the idea of friendship from a superficial use of it.

Part of the problem, I think, is that as our culture has raised up the ideal of romantic love to really unreasonable heights, and all other relationships have become cheapened. To "just be friends" seems to mean something less good than lovers, something less important, less intimate, less valuable. "Can't we just be friends?" has come to mean, look, can't we make this relationship less important, less anxiety-producing, something easier to control, easier to ignore?

I think it is interesting that the people who are rethinking the value of friendship, who are taking on the hard work of reinventing and revaluing friendship are our young people. I'm sure you have all seen "BFF" in emails and in print. Of course, by now, we all know that that means "Best Friends Forever." Lately I've been seeing something that had me stumped for a while – it's a < (less than sign) followed by the number 3. Any ideas what that means? Raise your hand if you think you know what that means.

Now, look around and see whose hands are raised. Anyone older than 20 who knows what this means is probably someone who has a child less than 20. What *does* it mean? It's a heart, sideways, of course, but it is hardly ever used for a romantic friend.

You see, I think that young people, more than the rest of us, know about the limits of romantic love. They've seen it go bad, go wrong, turn into something else, when their friends or parents or other people's parents turn from lovers into strangers. And they

wonder about romantic love, how trustworthy it is, how much you can rely on it.

Is it possible for friendship to be a sacred relationship? Is it possible for friendship to be a relationship that can bear the weight of the Kingdom of God? Well, here's the truth as I see it.

I have, and many people have, invested quite a lot of their lives, their treasure, their hopes and their dreams in the Kingdom of God, in this church and churches like it as a foretaste of that Kingdom, in their children and their fellow believers and strangers out in the world as people for whom Christ died and for whom the church continues to live.

But, the only way there will be a Saint Nicholas twenty-five years from now is if our confirmands and our young adults, our children want it to exist, work for it to exist, give of their time and treasure and dreams for it to exist. There's a reason, I think, why the mortgage on the North Wing is for 25 years. The only way that there will be a confirmation class for the year 2034 is if our confirmands are as convinced of the necessity, the value and the beauty of faith as we are and if they are able to convince their children of the same thing.

We talk about God's Plan – well, there it is. There is no Plan B. Jesus and his friends, the disciples. In these latter days, his disciples, for better or worse, are you and me and increasingly will be our children.

That's a lot to ask of teen-agers. How can we help them? Who can we be for them? Well, we can be friends. Now, I'm not sure whether parents can be friends to their children – there are lots of responsibilities of parents and lots of expectations for parental authority that make friendship difficult. But for the rest of us, how can we be friends to these young people who hold our dreams in their hands?

Well, the Gospel lesson tells us some things that are important if we are to be friends. Obviously, we are to love them and that's not very hard, but what exactly does that mean? Well, let's look deeper into the Gospel lesson. First, Jesus tells us that a friend lays down his life for his friends. We need to take this seriously, I think, but certainly at the very least, this means to put their interests ahead of our own, rather than making them vehicles for our interests. It means allowing them their own dreams rather than making them fulfill ours. Second, being a friend means speaking honestly. What does Jesus say? You are my friends because I've told you every thing the Father has told me. That sure works for me – over the past couple of years, I *have* practically told them everything I know. We need to share with them the truths we know about the world and about ourselves and about them. Pass on our faith and be honest about our doubts so they won't think that they are somehow wrong or defective for having both faith and doubts. Third, being friends means sharing joy. In the past year, we and the confirmands have had a lot of learning, a lot of talking, but most of all, a lot of joy. Finally, being friends means bearing fruit. Friends aren't afraid to make a difference for each other. Friends take risks, are vulnerable, friends laugh and cry together, friends work together, for the good of each and of all.

Friendship, with God and with one another can be sacred, a relationship set aside where we learn in community, a place of love and self-sacrifice, a place of honesty and sharing joy, a place of making a difference for each other. Let's be friends.

Amen.