

I Have Called You Friends

BY GAIL R. O'DAY

Jesus gave everything to his friends—his knowledge of God and his own life. Jesus is our model for friendship—because he loved without limits—and he makes it possible for us to live a life of friendship—because we have been transformed by everything he shared with us.

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.

John 15:12-15

Contemporary Christian piety tends to place words like “sin,” “redemption,” “atonement,” “justification,” “repentance,” and “born again” at the center of conversations about what it means to live out the offer of salvation made available through the life and death of Jesus Christ. “Friendship” does not figure prominently in such a theological world, since friendship is normally relegated to the secular realm, as exemplified by the prominence of friends as the pivot of plots in television shows and movies. Yet as the quote from the Gospel of John shows, nothing could be farther from the truth. For Jesus, friendship is the ultimate relationship with God and one another.

One of the most common verbs for “love” in Greek is *phileō*; the Greek word for friend, *philos*, comes from this verb. In the New Testament a “friend” is immediately understood as “one who loves.” This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point for reclaiming friendship as a resource for faith and ethics for contemporary Christians.

FRIENDSHIP IN THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Friendship was an important topic in the Greek and Roman cultures in which the early Church took shape and the New Testament documents were written. For Aristotle and classical philosophers who followed him, friendship was a key social relationship. In the democratic ideal of the Athenian *polis*, or city-state, friendship exemplified the mutual social obligation on which the *polis* depended.

But it is also true the virtuous man's conduct is often guided by the interests of his friends and of his country, and that he will if necessary *lay down his life in their behalf*.... And this is doubtless the case with those who give their lives for others; thus they choose great nobility for themselves.¹

This quotation from Aristotle represents the classical ideal of friendship expressed by many writers. In the *Symposium*, Plato writes, "Only those who love wish to die for others." Lucian, a Hellenistic philosopher and storyteller, promises to tell his readers of "many deeds of blood and battles and deaths for the sake of friends."²

For modern readers, Jesus' definition of love and friendship in John 15:13—to lay down one's life for one's friend—is completely unprecedented. Most contemporary language about friendship does not speak in terms of life and death. We celebrate our friends, we eat and drink with friends, we take vacations with friends, we are there when a friend is in need; but the modern ideal of friendship is not someone who lays down his or her life on behalf of another. In the ancient world, however, Jesus' words articulated a well-known ideal for friendship, not a brand new idea. This does not mean that any more people laid down their lives for their friends in the ancient world than are inclined to do so today—but it does show that the ideal of doing so belonged to the ancient perspective on friendship.

An additional aspect of ancient friendship is important for understanding friendship in the Gospel of John. In the first-century world of the New Testament, discussions of friendship moved from a friendship ideal to focus on the more pragmatic realities of patron-client relationships and on the political expediency captured in expressions like "friend of the emperor" (see 19:12). One of the main distinguishing marks of a friend in this context was the use of "frank speech" (*parrēsia*). Philosophers counseled the patron to be on the lookout for whether "friends" were speaking honestly and openly or whether they were engaging in flattery to further their own ends:

Frankness of speech, by common report and belief, is the language of friendship especially (as an animal has its peculiar cry), and on the other hand, that lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble....³

According to the Hellenistic philosophers, to be someone's friend was to speak frankly and honestly to them and to hold nothing back.

The New Testament writings were not created in a social vacuum. These two dimensions of friendship in the ancient world — *the gift of one's life for one's friends* and *the use of frank and open speech* — informed the way that the Gospel of John and its readers understood language about friendship.

John 15:12-15 is the key passage in John for a theology of friendship. Jesus enacts friendship throughout the Gospel, but these verses provide the words to describe and name who and what Jesus is as friend. In John, Jesus is both the model and the source of friendship. As the model of friendship, he calls the disciples to love as he has loved. As the source of friendship, he makes possible their own friendship through what he has given them.

JESUS AS THE MODEL OF FRIENDSHIP

As we have seen, Jesus' words in John 15:12-15 would have sounded somewhat familiar to his followers and to the Gospel's first readers. As a teaching, John 15:13 affirmed a common cultural ideal — to look to the interests of the other for the sake of the common good. What distinguished Jesus' words from this ideal was not their content, but the fact that Jesus did not merely talk about laying down his life for his friends. Jesus enacted the ancient ideal of friendship — he lay down his life for his friends. Jesus' whole life is an incarnation of the ideal of friendship. What Jesus teaches he is already living. The pattern of Jesus' own life and death moves the teaching of John 15:13 from philosophical ideal to an embodied promise and gift.

A quick review of some key passages from John will illustrate how Jesus' entire life and death is an act of friendship. The "Good Shepherd" discourse of John is a useful place to begin. John 10 begins with a parable about a sheepfold: he focuses first on the gate (10:1-2) and then on the shepherd (10:3-5). This parable gives a very realistic picture of sheep herding and of the role of the shepherd. Jesus interprets this parable by identifying himself with both the gate (10:7-10) and the shepherd (10:11-18). The good shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11b) and so puts care of the sheep above all else. This is in striking contrast to the hireling who would put the sheep in jeopardy rather than risk his own life (10:12-13). The contrast between the shepherd and the hireling is like that between the true and the false friend — the false friend will not be around in a time of crisis, but the true friend will be. As one ancient storyteller writes, "Just so in calm weather a man cannot tell whether his sailing master is good; he will need a storm to determine that."⁴

But Jesus is not simply telling a story about shepherds and hirelings, about true and false friends. Jesus is talking about himself, about the love that animates everything he does. To make this clear, Jesus speaks directly, in first-person language: "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). He talks directly about his own life and death: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord" (10:17-18a). Jesus is not

speaking generally about the gift of one's life for others. Jesus is making a specific promise about his own life.

Jesus' arrest and death show that his promise here is true and reliable. The scene of the arrest in the garden in John 18:1-14 has interesting echoes of John 10. Jesus leads his disciples into an enclosed garden, recalling the shepherd and the sheepfold of John 10:1-5; there is a thief in the garden, Judas (18:2; cf. 12:6), like the thief in the sheepfold (10:1).⁵ In the Gospel of John, Jesus does not wait for Judas to identify him with a kiss. Because Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, he goes forward to meet Judas and so deprives the "thief" of any access to the flock. Read in light of John 10, Jesus' act of stepping forward to meet those who come to arrest him (18:4-6) shows the truth of his announcement and promise in 10:17-18: he lays down his life of his own accord. At 18:11, Jesus states explicitly that he chooses the death that is before him ("the cup that the Father has given me," cf. 12:27). Jesus' life is not taken from him, but he willingly chooses the ultimate act of friendship.

Jesus' free offer of his life for his friends is also illustrated in many details of the crucifixion story in John. For example, unlike in the Synoptic Gospels where Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross (for example, Luke 23:26), in John Jesus carries his own cross to Golgotha (19:17), symbolizing how he lays down his own life.

LIVING JESUS' LOVE

Yet for Jesus, his own act of life-giving friendship is not the end of the story. Jesus does not merely talk the language of friendship, he lives out his life and death as a friend

and he commands that his followers do the same (John 15:12-14). The commandment to love as Jesus has loved may be the most radical words of the Gospel because it claims that the love that enabled Jesus to lay down his life for his friends is not unique to him. This love can be replicated and embodied over and over again by his fol-

lowers. To keep Jesus' commandment is to enact his love in our own lives. Jesus affirms the significance of this commandment by stating that his followers become his friends to the extent that they keep his commandment.

Jesus' words here invite us to reexamine the sometimes casual way we refer to Jesus as our friend. The mark of friendship with Jesus is not what

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Jesus does for us—listen to our sorrows, walk beside us, hear our prayers—but what we do for Jesus. One popular form of piety today is the WWJD bracelet. This question, “What would Jesus do?” is intended as a reminder to contemporary Christians that their ethical and moral decision making, about small and large things, should be guided by the model of Jesus. Yet John proposes a very radical answer to that question, an answer that essentially renders the question irrelevant. For John, there is no point to asking at each moment of decision, “what would Jesus do?” because for John, Jesus has already acted decisively in love. Jesus has been the ultimate friend—he gave his life in love for us. Now it is our turn to be Jesus’ friend,

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which means that we love one another as he has loved us.

Such an understanding of friendship and the life of faith means that the way Christians account for their piety and make decisions about what is ethical or moral behavior must be reassessed. If we take Jesus’ commandment to love seriously, and if we long to be called “friend” by Jesus, then the Christian vocation is to give love freely and generously without counting the cost and without wondering and worrying about who is on the receiving end of our limitless love. Because this, too, is how Jesus loved. Jesus loved Judas, even though Jesus was well aware that Judas would betray him (John 6:64, 70-71). Jesus did not exclude Judas from the circle of his love, but loved him in the same ways that he loved all of his other followers. What counts most is the embodiment of God’s love in the world, not the character of those who receive this love.

Not many of us will find ourselves in a situation where we are asked to lay down our lives as an expression of friendship and an act of love (although it is important to recognize that the stories of the saints and martyrs of the Church remember times and places where such an expression of love has been the case and so remind us that we can never know what will be asked of us and what we may be able to give in Jesus’ name). But that does not mean that we are therefore exempt from Jesus’ commandment to love as he loved. John 21 helps to illustrate this. In this chapter, the fates of Peter and the beloved disciple take center stage. Peter, after repeated questioning by Jesus, affirms that he loves Jesus and that he will feed Jesus’ sheep (21:15-19). John 21:18-19 tells how Peter will live out Jesus’ love—he will die a martyr’s death. But the beloved disciple, the disciple who is closer to Jesus than any other disciple (see John 13:23-25; 19:26-27), will not die a martyr’s death. Instead, he will live to be a very old man (John 21:22-23). He

will not love in the same way that Peter loved, but will enact Jesus' love in another way – by telling the stories on which this Gospel is based (21:24; see also 19:35). Both of these disciples are held up to the Gospel reader as true disciples, yet their enactments of love follow two completely different paths.

In the gift of his life in friendship, Jesus showed that true love is love that knows no limits. As the hour of Jesus' death approaches, John tells the reader that Jesus loved his own "to the end" (13:1). "To the end" (*eis to telos*) can mean simultaneously "to the end of time" and "to the full extent of love." To love to the full extent of love means that Jesus loves perfectly, that in Jesus' act of love one sees love perfected. For Jesus, and subsequently for Peter, the full extent of love meant the laying down of one's life. For the beloved disciple, the full extent of that love meant testifying with his whole life to the love of God in Jesus. John 21 suggests that both ways of loving are acts of faithfulness, that both ways of loving make one Jesus' friend.

JESUS AS THE SOURCE OF FRIENDSHIP

In John 15:14, friendship with Jesus is still conditional: "you are my friends *if* you do what I command you." But in John 15:15, that condition seems to be removed, because Jesus says, "I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends." What accounts for the change? Not something that the disciples have done, because their enactment of Jesus' commandments still remains in the future. No, it is something that Jesus has done: "I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15). Jesus, like the true friends about whom the Greek and Roman philosophers write, speaks plainly and honestly with his disciples and through this plain speaking, acknowledges them as his friends. The disciples are Jesus' friends because he has spoken to them openly; he has made known to them everything that he has heard from the Father.

The fourth-century theologian Ambrose eloquently captures this dimension of John 15:15:

Let us reveal our bosom to [a friend], and let him reveal his to us. Therefore, he said, I have called you friends, because all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you. Therefore a friend hides nothing, if he is true: he pours forth his mind, just as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of his Father.⁶

In sharing everything, Jesus "enables his disciples to participate in the intimacy and trust of the Father, by means of which they acquire that 'openness' (*parrēsia*) which is the privilege of a free man and a friend..."⁷

This intimacy can be seen most clearly in the foot-washing story of John 13. The foot washing is a sacrament of friendship. For example, the verb used to describe Jesus' removal of his outer robe at 13:4 is the same verb used in John 10 to describe Jesus' laying down his life (10:15, 17-18). Jesus' "laying down his robe" anticipates his "laying down his life" in friendship.

In the foot washing, Jesus offers himself completely to his disciples, assuming the social role of servant, in order to give a tangible shape to his love. Servants, not hosts or masters, wash the feet of guests, and in the foot washing, Jesus makes the ultimate act of hospitality and friendship. He stands neither on ceremony nor on precedent, but engages in an act that makes his love and grace visible. Peter's initial resistance (John 13:6-7) to

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Jesus' foot washing shows how radical an act the foot washing was. But Jesus will not let Peter's resistance govern the moment. Instead, he explains the foot washing to his disciples by saying, "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me" (13:8). Jesus' followers are asked to receive what Jesus

gives and so participate in Jesus' act of love. A paraphrase of 13:8 in the language of friendship would be, "Unless I wash you, you are not my friend."

In the foot washing, Jesus and the disciples move from being servants and master to being friends. Jesus will name this transformation for the disciples in John 15:15, but he has already enacted it for them in the foot washing. He has led them into the mysteries of God, in action and in word. In the foot washing, Jesus gives the disciples something—a share with him—and that share with Jesus is what makes any subsequent acts of service and friendship possible for the disciples. Jesus has transformed the community through his love, so that they can continue his acts of love. Love and service are defined by what Jesus has done, and what Jesus has done is share himself completely with the disciples through the symbolic act of foot washing.⁸

LIVING THE FRIENDSHIP THAT JESUS MAKES POSSIBLE

Plain and honest speaking may not seem to us as radical an act of friendship as the gift of one's life, but it is an essential characteristic of Jesus' friendship with us. Jesus' commandment to love as he has loved might feel unattainable were it not for the character of his friendship with us. Because Jesus, in his life and death, his words and deeds, showed and told his followers "everything" about God's love, his followers' relationship to the world and to one another was forever changed. Jesus' openness is a model of how we are to treat one another, but it also provides the well-spring that makes our acts of friendship possible. Jesus' plain and honest speaking, his full revelation of God's love, has made human life more holy because he has treated his followers as full partners in his relationship with God. His friendship is more than the model for human love and friendship; Jesus' friendship becomes the source of disciples' capacity for friendship.

We have been changed by Jesus' honest and plain speaking, and this transformation lies at the heart of Christian friendship. To speak as openly to others as Jesus did to his followers is a radical act because it is an act that assumes that everyone with whom we speak is our partner and companion. This kind of plain speaking is different from what we normally mean when we "tell people what they need to hear" or "speak one's mind." Those instances of plain speaking are the opposite of friendship because they are based on a master/servant or teacher/student model—the speaker positions himself or herself over against the listener. Jesus has replaced such models with a friendship model (John 15:15). Both speaker and listener are transformed by the plain speaking of friendship because in holding nothing back, the speaker acts in the intimacy and trust of transformative love. The speaker risks herself in the speaking; the listener risks himself in the hearing.

Jesus gave everything to his friends—his knowledge of God and his own life. Jesus is our model for friendship—because he loved without limits—and he makes it possible for us to live a life of friendship—because we have been transformed by everything he shared with us. Through friendship we come to know God and through friendship we enact the love of God. We can risk being friends because Jesus has been a friend to us.

NOTES

1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.8 (1169a18–25), quoting from H. Rackham, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), *italics added*.

2 Plato, *Symposium* 179B, also 208D; Lucian, *Toxaris* 36. In the New Testament, Paul echoes this theme: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).

3 Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 51.

4 For example, Lucian, *Toxaris*, 36.

5 For a discussion of the way motifs from John 10 echo throughout the Gospel, see Karoline Lewis, *Rereading the Shepherd Discourse Back into the Fourth Gospel* (New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2008).

6 Ambrose, *On the Duties of the Minister*, 3.22.135.

7 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Seabury, 1982), volume 3, 110.

8 See Gail R. O'Day, *John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, New Interpreters Bible, IX (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 727-728.



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