

John 15:9-17: I Call You Friends

C. Nolan Huizenga, Highland Presbyterian, Louisville KY, 5 May 2024

Listen with me for God's word to us from the Gospel of John, chapter 15 (CEB):

[Jesus continued,] "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don't call you servants any longer, because servants don't know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You didn't choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. I give you these commandments so that you can love each other.

Allie has just freed herself from a psychiatric hospital where she survived electroshock therapy, administered against her will. Amnesic from those "buzzings," Allie begins to rebuild her life and her mind. She moves into an abandoned greenhouse and makes a home for herself there.

Allie is learning to navigate in a world where she doesn't always understand the ways people relate to each other. Simple social interactions often baffle her. She thinks deeply about common phrases and themes. At one point Allie ponders her future and she makes a list — she makes a lot of lists — of what to do about *people*. She writes:¹

- Do you want
- 1) To live with another person?
 - 2) A man?
 - 3) A woman?
 - 4) No one?
 - 5) Do you want to...love...another person?
 - 6) "Fall in love"?
 - 7) What is falling in love?
 - 8) Is it part of making love or different?
 - 9) Do you wish to marry?
 - 10) None of these?²

Allie's one of my favorite characters in fiction. She's one of two protagonists in Walker Percy's novel *The Second Coming*. The narrator continues,
Was there something she did not know and needed to be told? Perhaps it was a matter of "falling in love." She knew a great deal about pulleys and hoists but nothing about love. She went to the library to look up love as she had looked up the mechanical advantages of pulleys. Surely great writers and great lovers of the

¹ The paragraph to this point is adapted from "Some Stuff for Easters 5 and 6, Year B" a paper by Mike Wilson for the Lectio Jubilate lectionary study group, January 2012. Mike and I share a deep appreciation for Walker Percy and especially *The Second Coming*.

² Percy, Walker. *The Second Coming*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1980. p. 239.

past had written things worth reading. Here were some of the things great writers had written:

Love begets love
 Love conquers all things
 Love ends with hope
 Love is a flame to burn out human ills
 Love is all truth
 Love is truth and truth is beauty
 Love is blind
 Love is the best
 Love is heaven and heaven is love
 Love is love's reward

"Oh my God," Allie said aloud in the library and smacked her head. "What does all that mean? These people are crazier than I am!"³

A bright young woman who has experienced memory loss, Allie takes nothing for granted about understanding words or people. Her ruminations on love make us smile because love indeed is a wild mystery, maybe the biggest mystery of all.

Before Jesus goes to his death, the Gospel of John records a long goodbye Jesus shares with his disciples. This "Farewell Discourse" spans five chapters and is the longest speech Jesus makes in the gospel. In the verses we heard today, Jesus tells his disciples to "remain in my love" and "love each other as I have loved you." But what does all that mean? Were the disciples as baffled by love as Allie is? As we can be?

I think *this* is why God came as a human being.
 Jesus reveals that God loves us.
 Jesus delivers God's love to us.
 And Jesus translates God's love into forms we can grasp.

John's Gospel tells us that all love starts with God. For God so loved the world and sent God's Son so that the world might be saved through him. God's love starts this whole story in motion. When Jesus gets baptized, he hears God say, "You are my beloved Son." That divine love nurtures Jesus through the hard years of his ministry. He retreats often to commune with God, where creative love flourishes as it flows between Jesus and the One he calls Father.

Drawing on this intimacy with God, Jesus shares love with the people around him. Now, preparing to leave them, Jesus tells his disciples, "I call you friends." Our English translations don't do justice to that sentence. The word that's translated "friends" comes from a Greek word for *familial* love. Jesus is really saying *You friends are dear to me. I call you my beloved siblings.*

To be a friend of Jesus means to be loved through and through. Which is extremely good news because Jesus' friends were a mess.
 Jesus loved his disciples when they misunderstood him over and over.
 Jesus loved Peter who leaped into the sea and started to drown.
 Jesus loved Mary who was tormented by her demons.

³ *ibid.* p. 240-41.

Jesus loved James and John even when they asked for seats of honor in God's kingdom.
 Jesus loved Martha in her anxiety about getting things done.
 Jesus loved the wealthy young man who walked away sad.
 Jesus loved the Samaritan woman who had had five husbands.
 Even as he was betrayed by a kiss, Jesus loved Judas.
 Jesus loved Peter when he swore he never knew Jesus.
 Jesus loved them all when they deserted him in fear.
 Jesus loved Thomas when he needed more proof.
 Jesus loved them all as they one-by-one came to believe he was raised from death.

Nothing Jesus' followers do — back then or now — can keep Jesus from offering love. "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you," Jesus explains. "Remain in my love." He tells his friends to stay rooted in his love, as he is rooted in God's love.

Just a few verses above, as Megan preached last week, Jesus tells them "I am the vine and you are the branches." He paints this image of a healthy, growing plant whose branches draw their life and nourishment from the stem. Megan reminded us that *Jesus* is that stem, rooted in God, and delivering divine love to all of us followers, we who are thirsty branches.

But even that's not the whole story about love. Jesus loves his friends so they themselves might become good at loving! "This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you." Here's the thing: Love makes us into who God wants us to be. That's exactly why Jesus gives love and tells us to love.

Two beautiful outcomes emerge when Jesus' followers love each other the way he loves. Jesus says we'll experience complete joy, and we will produce the fruits of love. Those are not two separate results! They're interrelated.

Loving wholeheartedly, self-givingly, compassionately, loving without doling it out as nickels and dimes, loving God and our neighbors as we love our own selves — loving like that generates joy in your heart as you love. And receiving love like that can bring new life and hope and compassion and grace and freedom. These are the fruits of love.

The most radical fruit of loving is the one Jesus highlights: "No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends." I think Jesus says it this way because we at least can imagine sacrificing ourselves for someone dear to us. In Jesus' own life he takes it even further and lays down his life for the good of both friends and enemies alike. That is a messy and daring kind of love, the kind of divine love that turns enemies into friends.

And every once in a while someone in our world will do something Jesus-y like that. Some of you have heard me mention Keshia Thomas's story. In 1996 when Keshia was 18 years old, hooded Ku Klux Klan members held a rally in her hometown of Ann Arbor, MI, while a much larger group of citizens protested the Klan's presence.⁴

Keshia was among the anti-KKK protesters when someone shouted *There's a Klansman in the crowd!* "They turned around to see a white, middle-aged man wearing a Confederate

⁴ Wynne, Catherine. "The teenager who saved a man with an SS tattoo." *BBC News Magazine* online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24653643>

flag T-shirt” and sporting a Nazi SS tattoo on his arm.⁵ The man started hurrying away as the crowd chased him. Collective anger turned the protesters into a mob. Someone shouted “Kill the Nazi!” and the man was knocked to the ground. People started kicking and hitting him with their protest signs.

Keshia, a Black woman still in high school, “threw herself on top of a man she did not know and shielded him from the blows.”⁶ All of a sudden the startled mob were beating not an outcast but one of their own. The fury abated. The BBC published some amazing documentary photos of this event.

So what gave [Keshia] Thomas the impetus to help a man whose views...appeared...so different from her own, [someone who never thanked her]? Her religious beliefs played a part. Also, she says, “I knew what it was like to be hurt. The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me.”⁷

Now in her 40s and living in Houston, Texas, [Keshia] says she tries to do something to break down racial stereotypes every day. No grand gestures — she thinks that small, regular acts of kindness are more important. “The biggest thing you can do is just be kind to another human being. It can come down to eye contact, or a smile. It doesn't have to be a huge, monumental act.”⁸

Jesus calls his followers to love creatively and unselfishly like he does. When we do, empathy trumps separation, compassion trumps contempt, in all kinds of situations.

Parents lovingly give so much of themselves as they respond to the unique and often challenging needs of their children.

Keshia and many other people use lovingkindness to overcome racial hatred.

The character Allie, back at her greenhouse, has the surprise of someone falling literally into her world. She and he are both rediscovering their own lives. They begin to learn about love, both human and divine, by encountering its mysteries together.

And a community of Jesus-followers like us?

Jesus calls us friends, and so calls us to *love each other wholeheartedly* through all our quirks, failures, beauties, griefs, successes, transitions. Today's report from the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee will give us a chance to welcome transition with love.

We also *love the world around us*, which God so loves. One way you and I do that is by caretaking of the earth, air, water, and creatures with whom we share this world. If you haven't yet, I encourage you to look over the bulletin board our Green Team recently created. It's out in the hallway back here. They've highlighted what together we're already doing in environmental stewardship, and what love invites us to work on next.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

And we're called to *love even our enemies* creatively and kindly, as Jesus did. When we let that much of Jesus' love loose into the world, his joy will be complete. And so will ours.

In the name of God who is love,
Jesus Christ the Beloved,
and the holy passion of the Spirit.



9

⁹ *ibid.*