

You've Got A Friend.....Maybe....

John 15: 9-17

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PLAY audio clip from Carole King's "You've Got A Friend"

*"When you're down and troubled and you need some love and care
And nothing, nothing is going right.
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night.
You just call out my name and you know wherever I am,
I'll come running, to see you again.
Winter, spring, summer or fall, all you have to do is call
And I'll be there, you've got a friend."*

Really? Winter, Spring, Summer or Fall? That's all I have to do is call? And you'll be there? Anywhere? Anytime? Can I get YOUR number?

How many of us have those kinds of friends? More importantly, how many of us ARE that kind of friend?

A woman whose husband was dying at home recently, told me her friend from Arizona flew out to be with her – to stay however long it took and stayed with her a couple weeks – half that time prior to her husband's death in the home so she wouldn't face that moment without someone else in the house, and for a week after he died, so she wouldn't be by herself those first days.

She said to me, "You know, you don't get many friends like that."

And I said, "I'm guessing a lot of people don't have ANY friends like that!"

"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."

The next time someone asks you to "friend" them on Facebook maybe you should ask them exactly what they're expectations are..... How far does this go? How deep does this run?

"You are my friends," Jesus said. "Not slaves or servants, but friends. So, I command you, love one another as I have loved you."

Maybe it is not unique to us, but it seems in the society that I've grown up – this very individualistic society; self-actualized life of the 20th and 21st centuries – I think it is hard for us to read the language of love and friendship any other way than psychologically. We've been steeped in the language of individual psychology to such an extent it is hard to imagine there is any definition of love other than a personal warm, fuzzy, romantic feeling, or a definition of friendship that isn't about companionship and compatibility.¹

That's not what this passage is talking about. Love in this passage is not a psychological state, nor is it an internal sentiment. It's clear that this love Jesus is talking about is something you do; not something you feel. A great man once said that "justice is love made public." The love that Jesus here is commanding is a matter of will; it's a matter of intention; it's a matter of deed. It's not just something that happens or sneaks up on you; it's intentional.

"Even to the point," Jesus says, "the willingness to die." And it's not for a child or a spouse, but for a friend in Christ. Take a look around at your fellow Jesus followers. Anyone here you're willing to go to the mat for today? These are the ones He says willing to die for. If you and I go through the rest of Jesus' teaching, His words, His actions, it may mean the friend we are to be willing to die for isn't even among church folk – but our neighbor – any neighbor. Even a Samaritan.

Someone recently described one of the greatest challenges of the 21st Century Church is whether the church will function as a law-based community of faith or as a grace-based community of love. Will we be defined by some carefully articulated, theologically sophisticated, logically delineated "Articles of Faith" – Statement of Beliefs – doctrinal declaration to which everyone must subscribe? Or will the church instead welcome its role as a living, breathing, healing, helping organism not best known for its doctrine, but best known for its Acts of Love?

My only quibble with the article was – it intimated it's the challenge of the church ONLY in the 21st Century. Friends, that's been the challenge of the church since its beginning!! In EVERY century. Will we be about law and doctrine? Or will we be about grace and love?

Jesus did not command us to live a life defined by legalistic particulars. Jesus offered us this commandment – Love one another as I have loved you. Instead of a series of laws, Jesus declared you and I are to live according to the mandate of love – to be loving enough to even be willing to set our own well-being aside for the sake of others.

No greater love, than you lay down your life for your friends? That's a great text but I've always thought, "How likely?" If you or I worked for the secret service, maybe you have to take a bullet for somebody. But most of us don't get up in the morning thinking that that might happen today for me.

But what if we don't take it quite that literally. What does it mean for us to "lay ourselves down?" To "lay down" our precious lives. The stuff of our lives – material or theological or vocational or familial or ecclesiastical stuff of our lives – WHATEVER gets in the way of our being an extension of God's love in the world? What if we were willing to lay those things down in order to love? What if you and I were called to lay down our daily priorities for the sake of God's priorities in the world? Now God's really messing with us.

A couple young lovers, sitting on the porch swing, sunlight fading, the beautiful large, yellow moon rising on the horizon. The air is still, the crickets are chirping, her head is on his shoulder, his arm around her, snuggled close.

She looks up with her lovely blue eyes, and says, "Darling, do you love me?"

"Yes Honey, you know I love you...."

"Darlin', do you really love me?"

"Why Yes, honey, y'know I really love you."

"Darlin', do you love me enough to die for me?"

(Pause) "Well....honey.....mine's that **"UN**dying" kind of love."

Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you" – with a living AND dying love. God's self-emptying is God's way of loving. God's poverty; God's self-impoverishment is God's way of loving. God's living AND dying kind of love for the other is God's way of loving. And that's the love to which you and I are called.

"Love one another," Jesus says, "as I have loved you."

May it be so. AMEN.

1. Emily Askew, Feasting on the Gospels, John, Volume 2, Commentary on John 15: 12-17.