

John 15:14-17 and Ephesians 5:1-2
Being the Friends of Jesus
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I find it remarkable that among the last things Jesus chooses to talk about to his disciples - and through them future disciples like you and me - is friendship. He says many other things, of course, but what do you think the disciples remember the most; the doctrines or the deep friendship bestowed upon them? Isn't that always the case, that above all else we remember the relationships we have with people, whether they are family or friends or colleagues. Each of them may have much to teach about things we need to know, and often forget! Yet what you don't forget is the relationship.

I think this is why Jesus places so much emphasis on love, a word which we now barely understand and is often corrupted, but nevertheless you know the difference between love and hate or even love and indifference. You know even if you can explain it.

Dorothy Day the radical Christian established the Catholic Worker Movement among the poor often quoted her favorite writer Dostoevsky : "Love in Dreams is easy; love in practice is often harsh and dreadful." You know that that means if you have sat by the bedside of someone you love who is suffering or even dying. That last place you want to be is there and yet its the only place you want be at that moment. It's the way of love. You know what it means when you show up for those who have no one to show up for them - you know who they are - the lost, the lonely, the bewildered, the fearful and anxious. And who among us doesn't experience some of that these troublesome days?

Perhaps Jesus himself knew how difficult it is to keep love from being a sentimental gesture or reduced to religious cliché and hallmark cards. To make himself clear, he defines his own death as an act of love for his friends - knowing full well they would fall away from at the cross. This is why the cross of Jesus - is the most radical expression of friendship any of us will ever know and the supreme emblem of love that will defy ever effort to reduce it to sentimental words and gestures. Jesus by his own life and death, forms for his disciples a path of true friendship shaped by love. It's a path that few of us really know well and takes a lifetime of practice.

The other thing that is remarkable to me about Jesus' talk about friendship is that he assumes his friends will have a greater purpose than themselves. Go, Jesus says, live your lives as my friends who know what it means to love-in-practice because I have shown my way of life.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran Pastor, was 39 years old he was in prison for resisting the Nazification of the Church under the reign of Hitler. For Bonhoeffer the very core of Jesus' teaching was being slowly corrupted by a complicit and silent church that had lost a semblance of sacrificial love that those most vulnerable, not only Jews but gypsies, disabled people, gay and lesbian persons and any who did not support the move to make Germany great again. In the book of Acts, the early description of the church was "the friends of Jesus" because that was the purpose of those believers: to act like friends of Jesus in the world among strangers and neighbors and any who came in contact with them. Rather than acting as the Friends of Jesus, Bonhoeffer saw a corrupt church and he sensed that the language of

Christianity - the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - had been so distorted by hatred and malpractice, that it no longer had any power to transform human life.

Because the language was so corrupted and misunderstood, he cautioned those who sought to remain faithful to live a way of life that he called the ancient practice: Silence, Prayer and Righteous Action. The words that used to mean - God's grace, forgiveness, mercy, justice, compassion had been warped beyond recognition. In such a time which bears remarkable resemblance to our own, being the Friends of Jesus means pious words will not satisfy, what matters is Prayer and Righteous Action in the world.

In other words, living as the friends of Jesus - often incognito, without any attempt to defend the corrupted words. Bonhoeffer said, perhaps one day - in God's mercy - a new language of the gospel will emerge. But until then righteous action - the deeds of love for neighbor and stranger, the most vulnerable and threatened people - will testify to the presence of Jesus and bear fruit that is pleasing to God.

A year ago you sent me to Spain to walk the Camino Primitivo among strangers, those who have faith or no faith, and with those who had no positive experience of the Church, None. It was an occasion simply to be a friend of Jesus along the way- with no other agenda. Of course, being incognito for a pastor is a supreme challenge and one I'm still learning. Nevertheless it was a profound time for me to learn from my fellow travelers while I walked - or stumbled - along, hoping only to be a Friend, that Jesus would smile upon. A few months ago, three of those travelers with whom I became dear friends decided to come to America to visit me, experience our church, and explore this country. As you know they are here this morning. Gift upon gift. Along with our fourth traveler who surprised this morning! I have many things to say about that experience to say, much you've heard - but I think the most important thing is the calling to be a simple Friend of Jesus in the world. God is capable of doing all the rest, as long as we practice the love displayed for us in the cross of Jesus.

Don't you think this is what St. Paul had in mind when he said "Walk in Love as Christ walked in Love and gave himself for us?" **Walk-in-love** is simply another way of saying: practice Jesus way of love in the world that currently under threat from demonic powers and malevolent forces.

Walk in love, because being the Friends of Jesus among our neighbors and strangers is the most important thing we can do at this moment.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Roy Howard 8/24/2018 6:17 PM

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