

May 6, 2018  
**What a Friend**  
Annette Hill Briggs  
John 15:9-17

*<sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*<sup>12</sup> "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

People with whom we share no DNA. People we like. People with whom we have things in common: things; experiences; or hobbies; or commitments. That teensy, tiny fraction of the human population whose company we enjoy. These are the people we generally think of as our friends.

If you can find it, I recommend a British TV show called "The Secret Life of 4, 5, and 6 Year Olds." The producers give kids a set-up activity, then put secret cameras on them to watch them play. My favorite is one where two sets of 6-year-olds, each a boy and a girl, are given a doll and a bunch of doll accessories to pretend they are taking their baby to the park. Neither group knows the other couple is coming. Nor do the kids know that the doll can be made to cry remotely.

At first the kid couple works together to try to calm the baby. The boy gets bored really fast and quits playing, while the girl gets more and more frustrated. She's partly upset because their baby is upset. She's mostly upset because the baby-daddy, who is supposed to be helping, doesn't care that their baby is crying. She bounces it and checks its diaper and asks him to help her. He tries to explain it's not a baby – that it's a doll, probably broken, maybe they should try kicking it. She nearly loses her mind and starts crying, so he wanders off.

The camera goes back and forth between the couples, who aren't paying that much attention to each other at first. Then one baby stops crying (or doll, depending on who's telling the story). Can you guess what happens? The two girls who don't know each

other become friends and partners in working to soothe the crying baby, while the boys go off to kick trees or something.

In this world, for good reason, our friends are people who see the world like we do. They are the people who take and receive the service and activity we need and offer, in the ways we want to receive and give it. It was always a game to the boys, so they were just happier with people for whom it was also a game. It wasn't just a game to the girls, so they were happier with people who understood the gravity of taking good care of pretend children.

But it isn't really about *happiness* so much as it's about thriving. Good friends are the people toward whom we gravitate to help ourselves live like we most want to live. Friends sustain one another. And while the subject of friendships is a deep and interesting rabbit hole into which to fall – probably more for women than for men – I won't. I won't, because no matter what the social science answers are for why we choose the friends we do, Jesus' definition of friendship is other. If we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us, two shifts of understanding are in order:

- Who our friends are;
- How to be a friend.

Simply said, our friends are human beings. All seven billion of them, potentially. Because, unlike the way friendship works when Jesus isn't defining it, we don't choose. If we are to others as Jesus is to us, how people treat us is of no relevance. I don't know that Jesus had ever had a relationship talk with the disciples until here, in John 15. But here He says, *I no longer call you servants; instead I call you friends.*

Sounds good. But let's not be quick to dismiss the advantage of the master-servant model. At least we know what our job is, right? Jesus tells us what to do, and we do it; but Jesus is the one in charge. Always. We just follow orders. The master is always the master. The servant is always the servant. May not be fun, but at least it's clear. Nobody has to figure anything out.

*Friends* isn't so clear. Now who's in charge? Sure, Jesus is in charge of me and you; but between me and you, who is in charge? Well, according to Jesus, *you* are. But only if Jesus is talking to me. If Jesus is talking to *you*, then I am. Right? Because Jesus' definition of friendship centers on submission. Submitting to everyone else. (More on this in a minute.) Sticking with the question of who our friends are: the church thinks of the disciples as heroes. But they weren't, here in John 15. They are still mostly knuckleheads. And Jesus decides to love them here and now, before they are anything like the men and women they eventually become.

As if to say “*who your friends are*” – this is Jesus speaking in my imagination here – “*has nothing to do with what they can do for you or might ever do for you.*” The apostle wrote

about this in Romans 5: *When we were still sinners, Jesus died for us.* The Lord didn't wait for us to get ourselves together and be His good friend in order to be our good friend. God chose to be better to us than we deserve. Therefore, choose to befriend one another – *not because the other deserves it, Jesus says, but because you didn't deserve it either. And I chose you.* We are friends of Jesus, because God first loved us. We are friends to others, because God first loved us. It's not complicated at all.

A teenager I spend time with is the most bossed-around person I have ever known up close. Incarcerated people are probably no more bossed-around than her. Once when she didn't know I was close enough to hear, she sighed and said, "*God, I hate people.*" It was so deep-down honest that it made me laugh. Can you so relate to her? The adults in charge of her had the wisdom to get her a dog, a mutt named Lady. An unconditional relationship and someone for both of them to care for.

To love one another because God loved us isn't complicated at all, and yet feels nearly impossible as a way of life. Because, aren't people just the worst and the best of every single day, amen? Sometimes I also think, "*God, I just love people.*"

And great is the temptation, for those of us with the power to do so, to surround ourselves with the ones who help us be the selves we most want to be. If I could, I would surround myself with people like my nephew Parker, because he and I each think the other is a comic genius. But to such a definition of friendship, Jesus says, *No! Stop being so selfish. If you would abide in me like I told you to, five verses ago, you'd know how loved you are already, and you wouldn't need 50 daily Facebook Likes to keep your heart up. Go find some under-loved people for me to love through you.*

I know why we don't do it. We're afraid. We're afraid because we don't abide. We don't abide because we're lazy. And easily distracted. And afraid. Scott Simon told me yesterday morning about two suicide bombings in Kabul this week. Journalists got killed. More journalists than any day since the Taliban days. Scott had a different Afghani journalist on to talk about the ones who died. Some of them were his colleagues, his *friends*, he said. And he's brokenhearted now. And now, because they have names and families and a story, my heart hurts a little too. And sadly, my first impulse is to say that my heart hurts because I didn't turn the radio off in time, like I sometimes do when sad, sad news comes on. Having seven billion friends will break your heart every single day. Guaranteed!

Loving people hurts. And now Jesus tells us we have to love everybody – no matter what they've done or haven't done for us. No matter what they've done TO us. Who needs hurt like that? The right question, of course, is who needs love like that? The world, of course. All seven billion of us. If we knew that, and lived like we knew it, all manner of things would be well. But we don't. So they aren't.

The second shift in understanding Jesus' way of friendship is *how to be a friend*. By laying down your life. Again, not complicated, but practically impossible. The last time Jesus used this language was in John 10 – the Good Shepherd text. <sup>17</sup> *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.* <sup>18</sup> *No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.* Of course when He said it first, these disciples might have imagined Jesus dying, a martyr; a hero; in a battle, maybe. A sheep to the slaughter they'd never have imagined. This non-resistant, compliant, submissive goat to the great enemy of Israel.

It's a complicated saying. On its face and in context, it seems that Jesus means dying. Dying as He died. Putting one's own walking, talking, breathing body between my friend and my friend's enemy, absorbing whatever treatment my friend's enemy directs at my friend – which, not to make light of such a calling, seems slightly easier in that it must only be done once.

How does a disciple follow Jesus by doing something she can only do one time? And when Jesus says He has the power to lay it down and take it up again, does He mean the one death and resurrection, or some repetitive way of living? Something we can mimic in this *befriending others as Jesus has befriended us*?

I do not imagine discipleship as one long exercise of planning for which friend and in what moment Jesus expects me to die. It doesn't make sense to me. Not as much as the possibility that Jesus intends me to see this life of mine as something I lay down every day for the *friends* who cross my path. Not so much by my breath and blood, although it might come to that, but rather by my time and energy and will. Day in and day out. For years. Decades.

Because, honestly, what do we guard most closely? What do we protect from others? Time. Talent. And Treasure. The *STUFF* of my life that I consider MINE. And even when we itch to give it away, we want to give when and where we know it will be \_\_\_\_\_ (what?) \_\_\_\_\_? Appreciated. *It's just good stewardship*, we say.

But is it good discipleship? we should also ask. Does it mimic Jesus' example of *laying down one's life for one's friends*? The friends you've never met, who will never say *thank you*, who may never be grateful. Even now, I don't like this sermon. I don't like it for the inequity embedded in the language, the sense that we are empowered to do for others what others cannot do for themselves: *Loving the underloved*. I don't like the smack of that language, as if we have something others don't. We don't.

Insofar as we have not yet accepted our undeservedness of the love of God in Christ Jesus, we above all people are in need of Jesus and His grace. And now is the time for us to continue to abide in Him and Him in us.