

Message: "Jesus: Friend or Master?"

Scripture: 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.

Jesus as master whom we serve; Jesus as friend whom we love. What do we make of this - is Jesus our master, or our friend?

Let me tell you about some of my friends.

Shawna is a friend of mine who cuts my hair; I tell her what I would like it to look like, how much to remove, whether to trim my eyebrows or not (did you ever notice how as you grow older hair grows longer where it once didn't seem to grow at all?). She tries not to laugh when she discovers I might have tried to cut my own hair (she's compassionate in that way). She does a good job, and I always give her a tip. She's nice to me; I'm nice to her.

Jared is a friend of mine who works on my car; I tell him to align the tires and fix the parts needing repair that I cannot repair myself. When I wince at the bill, he's quick to acknowledge my pain; he talks in a calming way as I shakily hand him my credit card. He's nice to me; I'm nice to him.

Bethany is a friend of mine who bags my groceries; I tell her to put the eggs on the top, to use paper bags rather than plastic, and to keep my grocery-trip-snack out from the rest. Sometimes, I even help bag the groceries, if I'm feeling rather charitable. She always sends me off with "have a good day," whereupon I repeat the same. She's nice to me; I'm nice to her.

I may see these individuals as friends, but I wonder, how do they see me? Am I a friend to them? Or something else?

I don't mean to brag, but I've got 290 friends - at least, that's what Facebook tells me. That's quite a lot of friendships to nurture; thank goodness my

relationship with each one of them is largely a matter of pressing a "like" button every now and then, perhaps putting in a nicely-phrased comment when something they post catches my attention or makes me think. They're all nice to me; I'm nice to them.

Isn't it such a blessing to have such friends? And so very many of them?

Except -- is it just possible that the label "Facebook friend" means something a little less than authentic friendship? Perhaps even a ploy to think we have more meaningful friends than we actually have?

Are these people I've mentioned really my friends?

The Merriam Webster Dictionary tells us that "A friend is a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual [affection](#), typically exclusive of sexual or family relations." The keyword in this is the word "mutual" of course, implying an equitable affection and attention from either entity. The first few people I mentioned as my friends - the barber, the car mechanic, the grocery clerk,- these are people involved in transactional endeavors where one provides a service for the other who pays a bill for the service. One serves while the other pays.....take away the pay, and the service goes away. There is no real mutual affection here. Likewise, regarding Facebook Friends - if we don't know someone beyond our media platform interactions, we must realize that impersonal button clicks on the computer often imply even less mutual affection than an in-person interaction.

No, friendship means something else.

Let me tell you about some of my masters.

There's the police officer who rides a really cool motorcycle with flashing lights and a very loud siren that you get to see and hear close behind you if you speed down High Park Hill at the wrong time - and yes, I speak from experience. When that officer pulls you to the side of the road, it is clear that they are in charge and I am not - they are the master of the enforcement (and the writer of the ticket!).

There are the entities that put together the recently due IRS forms that we all have to fill out and send in precisely to detailed instructions that one ignores to

one's great peril. In tax season, the IRS is in charge, and I am not. They are the master of my financial reality regarding governmental apportionments.

There's Bishop Karen Oliveto, who oversees all clergy and congregations of the Mountain Sky Annual Conference to which you and I belong- she has a say over my professional status as a member of the ordained clergy, and is technically in charge of which pastors serve which congregations. In other words, she is my boss; not only my boss, but my manager, and my supervisor, and the authority over my position. She is the master of my vocation.

I see these individuals and overseers as masters of my life - but are they really? Is their authority over my life absolute? Maybe the Bishop.....no, their authority over my life is less master than circumstantial enforcer of the rules society and institutions deem necessary for the function of said society. They have no absolute command of my mind or my heart; they know me only in part, and represent the hierarchy of power we subscribe to in order to make civilized community a healthy and functional thing. They are not masters of my life, but administrators of policy and protocol.

No, master means something else.

Today, we have a sort of collision between the terms "friend" and "master," a collision Jesus causes when he says in verse 15 "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." Jesus, whom the disciples understand as lord and master of their lives, now claims that he understands their relationship to be one of friendship.

So here's the question for us today: is Jesus our Lord and Master, or our friend? Can you be a friend with someone who commands you? This is not normally how things work - there is a tremendous imbalance of power and authority between the two relational understandings. You've heard the adage "a parent can never be a friend" for the roles would confuse and disorient who has a say over what; for example, I do not let my grandchildren call the shots in our relationship (if I did, we'd eat vanilla ice cream for every meal, and we'd live down at the park where the favorite playground is.....).

But here, Jesus says "you are my friends if you do what I command you...." How confusing is that? Does a friend ever command another friend to do something? The problematic term here is "command" for any so-called friend who commanded another to do their bidding would not be considered a friend for long; they would be termed domineering or controlling or narcissistic - you know, unfriendly.

I'm not sure how to resolve this; frankly, I'm not sure it is intended that it be resolved, in that it speaks to the mysterious, wonderful, enigmatic nature of a sovereign God who created everything and rules over all and yet - and this is a huge "and yet" - insists on making things personal. I'm speaking about the insertion of the quality that makes our existence both overwhelmingly complex and unimaginably beautiful - the quality of love. It is the profound, sacrificial, grace-filled love of God that combines sovereignty with intimacy - in other words, that allows for Jesus to be both master and friend.

Melissa Earley is pastor of First United Methodist Church in Arlington Heights, Illinois. She says that "Jesus.....blurs the boundaries between "master" and "friend." He remains in them; they remain in him. They all remain in God. The lines between rabbi and disciples, leader and followers, Savior and saved get smudged. There is now a reciprocity, a greater mutuality, a shared vulnerability. They need each other."

This brings up another issue which is also hard to understand - namely, that God needs us in God's life. God wants to be loved, even needs to be loved, just as we want to be loved, and need to be loved; but God is God, above any need and without any deficiency or lack; yet, God needs us? God needs our love? Only if God has made it so; we can say no more - except that friend connotes love more than master.

I leave you with one last thought along these lines which may help our understanding of Jesus as both master and friend. It's the thought that for love to be real, it requires some type of servanthood to the beloved; love compels us towards a sort of obedience to the welfare of another. Brian Bantum is professor of theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary; he puts this obedience idea this way:

"Perhaps love without obedience is not really love. Perhaps this is what Jesus is confronting us with in his own life—that love is never love on its own terms. Love is always tied to obedience because obedience is tied to hearing, recognizing and bending ourselves into the will and desires of the one who's before us.

Jesus' command to love is an invitation to friendship—not one in which we set the terms but one in which we see the other's hopes, the other's desires, the other's possibilities, and live into them even though we're unsure of what God will do."

To love another is to seek to serve the other; the opposite is not necessarily true, in that service for reasons other than love is quite common. It is love that sets the bar for something only the divine can claim - that we are subjects of God who are loved into a life of friendship with Jesus.

Jesus is our master and our friend; or, perhaps more accurately, Jesus is our friend whom we choose to be master of our lives.