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## CHOOSING FRIENDS

JOHN 15:9-17

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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Love, joy, and friendship—all mentioned in today’s gospel lesson—are not making headline news these days. Rather, hatred, sadness, and enemyship are making the most rambunctious noise. As Wilfrid Laurier University religion and culture professor, Carol B. Duncan, recently said, “We are living in challenging times.” But we are not the only ones who have ever lived on tough existential terrain. In many ways, the history of humanity, since the human fall in the Book of Genesis, has been pretty rough.

Even in the ancient near eastern culture and early Christian communities, there were human struggles. We get a hint of it in the Gospel of John when Jesus tells the disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends.” The NRSV says “servants” but the Greek word, *doulos*, actually means “slaves” and that has a harsher sensibility to our contemporary ears. Yet it is true that Jesus and his disciples were in a slaveholding culture, and so to speak of “slaves” literally or metaphorically as in Jesus’s words here, shouldn’t be surprising.

The presence of the enslaved means there was violence at times, enacted upon the enslaved. In John, we get an example of this with the high priest’s slave, whom I talked about on Good Friday night. When Jesus is betrayed and arrested, “Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus”(18:10). Though Peter’s act could be viewed as a violent strike against the high priest, it is the slave who literally receives the actual physical blow. The ones in physical bondage received the brunt of the brutality. Because of their place in society, they were the ones expected to receive more violence than those in power such as the masters.

This is what happens in that ancient society, and this is similar to ours and has been the unfortunate history of humanity. We enact violence or it’s acted upon us. We are enslaved to systems, structures, and relations that support dehumanizing hierarchies, keeping certain people in their place—socially, economically, or religiously or so on. This way of being in the world endorses violence against others in order to maintain a social order or to create chaos. Either way, the goal, whether explicit or not, is to uphold a master-slave binary, where some hold power and are in control, while others are subservient and trapped in an accepted system that doesn’t nurture love because the system itself isn’t loving but rather, looney. It creates lunatics lusting for an increase in violence and bondage, where we see each other as slaves to be beaten, spit on, shot, robbed, and abused verbally, emotionally, or physically, and worse, killed. In this type of system, we don’t view each other as human beings created in the image of God. We only see ‘slaves,’ that is, objects, and not humans.

In his own challenging time, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy, instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.”

But remember what Jesus says: “I do not call you slaves any longer...but I have called you friends....” Jesus provides an alternative way. He’s saying that we can be friends and don’t have to be enemies, enslaved to one another nor enslaved to the vicious cycle of violence in which we’re always looking for a fight. Earlier in John, Jesus says, “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Jesus wants to set us free from the bondage of brutality and offers a pathway to do it. His way is love.

There is one critical, repeated, glaring command in the Johannine community. It is to “love one another [as I have loved you].” Jesus tells the disciples that if they keep his commandments, they abide in his love; and, if they do what he commands, then they’re his friend, so a friend abides in his love.

Friends don’t spew out hateful words against each other, enact violence against one another, or seek to destroy each other. Of course, there can be disagreements. According to Mark Twain, “The holy passion of Friendship is of so sweet and steady and loyal and enduring a nature that it will last through a whole lifetime, if not asked to lend money.” But even when some tensions arise, there’s always love because it’s a virtue of friendship. Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle writes that “friendship is a virtue, or involves virtue; and also it is one of the most indispensable requirements of life. For no one would choose to live without friends, but possessing all other good things.”

Even for Jesus, it was important; he saw his disciples as friends, not slaves, not those to be controlled but rather those with whom to share his life. Listen to what Jesus says: “I do not call you slaves any longer, because the slave 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.” In friendship, we are open to one another, vulnerable, and reveal things to one another; Jesus made known everything he heard from his Father to his disciples. If he saw them as slaves, he would have concealed, not revealed. They were his friends, so he opened his life to them.

And keep in mind friendship is a choice. Even Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Jesus chooses his friends, just like we do. We aren’t forced into friendship but historically, humans are forced into enslavement where there is no choice. We normally choose our friends. But in the case of Jesus in relation to the disciples, in relation to us, he chooses us. He takes the initiative.

We heard it last week in 1 John 4—“not that we loved, but that God loved us.” When we are baptized, it is God choosing us, claiming us, as his beloved children. In baptism, God tells us, ‘You are mine. You are my child. You are my friend. You are loved. You are chosen.’ “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world” Ephesians says (Ephesians 1:4). Robert Adams reflected on ‘pure love’ in a book of essays, and he writes, “Yes, God wants our love and praise, but not just because it would be good for us. God wants it because God wants us....” God desires our friendship, so much so that Christ is willing to die for it, which is what normally happens to slaves.

At least two times in John, Jesus says, “slaves are not greater than their master” (13:16 15:20), and one of those times was when the ‘master’ Jesus washes the feet of his ‘slaves,’ the disciples. In the act of washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus takes on the form of a slave by doing that which is normally performed by the enslaved. He doesn’t call the disciples ‘slaves’ anymore but ‘friends,’ but as we hear in Philippians 2, “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” That’s what Jesus says and what he did for his friends, because of love. Mark Twain once said, “The trouble is not in dying for a friend, but in finding a friend worth dying for.” To Christ, we were worth dying for.

So the Lord of creation took on the form of a slave and thus laid down his life and received violence against his body, because of love for his friends but also that we all might become friends through his love. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf says that Jesus “broke the vicious cycle of violence by absorbing it, taking it upon himself [on a cross]. He refused to be sucked into the automatism of revenge but sought to overcome evil by doing good—even at the cost of his life.”

In the end Jesus becomes a slave to end all slavery, violence and hatred. He dies to put to death the ways we keep killing each other as enemies. Friends of Jesus put away swords and put away a propensity to war and put away idolized, dehumanizing ideologies and philosophies and put away hurtful, hateful language but instead embrace

human dignity for all and the common ground that we are all chosen friends of Jesus, and not slaves, because of his selfless love.

Choose friendship, not enemyship. It's the way of Christ. Choose to be a friend and choose to make others friends. By doing so, you choose love. You never know what impact you might have.

One day, Luis, a freshman in high school saw another kid from his class walking home from school. His name was George. It looked like he was carrying all of his books, and Luis thought to himself, "Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday? He must really be a nerd."

Luis kept walking and saw a bunch of kids running toward George. They ran right up to him, knocking all his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying. Luis' heart went out to him and so he jogged over to him and as George crawled around looking for his glasses, there were tears in his eyes. Luis handed him his glasses, and said, "Those guys are jerks."

George looked at him and said, "Hey thanks!" There was a big smile on his face. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude. Luis helped him pick up his books, and carried his books as they talked all the way home.

Since it was Friday, Luis asked George if he wanted to play football on Saturday with him and his friends. He said 'sure,' so they hung out all weekend and the more he got to know George, the more he liked him, and Luis' friends thought the same of him.

Over the next four years, George and Luis became best friends. Fast forward to when they were seniors. George was valedictorian of their class, so he had to prepare a speech for graduation. Graduation day came and Luis could see that George was nervous about his speech. So, he smacked him on the back and said, "Hey, big guy, you'll be great!" George looked at him with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled and said "Thanks."

As he started his speech, he cleared his throat, and began. "Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach... but mostly your friends. I am here to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you a story."

He told the story of the first day he met Luis. Luis was in disbelief as he listened to George say that he had planned to kill himself over that weekend. He talked of how he had cleaned out his locker, so his Mom wouldn't have to do it later, and was carrying his stuff home. "Thankfully, [George said] I was saved. My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable," as he looked at Luis.

Never underestimate the power of your actions. One gesture can change a person's life. Christ changed us forever. That's what friends are for.