John 15:13-16 *Socially Distant: Friend of God*

***An Amazing Truth***I’ve mentioned more than once in the past month the irony I see in our current situation. When this year began, our first series of sermons was called “Force of Habit” and it was all about the importance of making a habit out of weekly church attendance. We used **Hebrews 10:25** as our text: “Let us not give up the habit of meeting together.”

And the irony is: less than 2 months later, we were forced by circumstances to give up the habit of meeting together. In the midst of a global pandemic, with a highly transmittable virus that no one has immunity to, it makes sense that gathering 200 to 300 people in our sanctuary is neither the wise nor loving thing to do. And I am extremely grateful that we have the options of a drive-in service and the internet to continue to stay in touch with one another.

But it does raise a couple of questions: do the things we said in January still apply? And if they do, does that mean our relationship with God is in jeopardy now that we can’t meet together at church?

My answer to the first question is: yes, the benefits of meeting together are still immense. And one of my hopes is that this period of enforced isolation will make all of us appreciate what a privilege we have when we get to come to church on Sunday mornings. I hope that we will all be hungry for the opportunity to worship together again.

But, in answer to the second question: if our relationship with God seems threatened now that weekly gathering in the sanctuary is not an option, then we are misunderstanding the role of meeting together in our lives of faith. I tried to make this point during the Force of Habit series, and I need to re-emphasize it now: **while weekly church attendance is a valuable spiritual discipline, it is not what makes us Christians.** Our connection to God does not come from visiting a certain building, or hanging out with certain people, it comes from having a personal relationship with the one who died for our sins.

It seems appropriate, then, to do **a series on maintaining our relationship with God when we can’t go to church.** It’s a huge mistake on my part if, as your pastor, I give you the impression that your connection to God is in danger because we cannot meet together. This is a series, then, that I hope will be applicable not just during this period of social distancing; but after we start gathering together again as well. Because our relationship with God should not be something that only takes place on Sunday mornings when we gather in a church building.

And I want to start with this amazing truth: **God wants you for a friend!** The key to maintaining a relationship with God—whether we can gather together or not—is to think of your relationship with Him as a friendship.

Here’s our text: John 15:13-16. John 15:13-16. This is part of Jesus’ discourse to His disciples on the night before His crucifixion. This is part of what Jesus wanted His closest followers to know when it mattered the most. And He talks about this amazing truth that He calls us His friends. **John 15:13-16:**

**13**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. **14**You are my friends if you do what I command. **15**I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. **16**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

The key line for us today, the part of this passage that conveys our big idea, is right there in the middle. In **verse 15:**

I have called you friends,

The word for “friends” here, the word used throughout the passage, is one you might recognize. It’s one of the Greek words for “love”: ***philoi***. It’s the root word behind “Philadelphia”, which we call the “city of brotherly love.” And that gets at the idea behind this word: it’s companionable love. It’s the kind of word you would use for a close companion, a trusted confidante, a dearly loved associate. It’s the kind of word you would use to describe your affection for a sibling; but also the kind of word you would use to describe someone you had no blood relation to, but whom you loved like a brother. In other words: this is the word for “friend.”

What Jesus is talking about here, then, is not just a causal acquaintance. He’s talking about a deep, personal, intimate comrade.

One of the technical ways this word was used in the ancient world was to describe the king’s inner circle of advisors. The King’s Friends.

Now, think about that: a king would have thousands of acquaintances. He would have hundreds of thousands, even millions of subjects; but he would only have a few friends. Only a few that could be called the King’s *philoi*. And these would be the ones who could come and go. Those who could enjoy direct access, close contact, confidential information.

Those acquaintances and subjects? They have to observe protocol when they are around the king. They have to keep things formal, maintain proper distance, be careful about what they say. Only those who are the king’s friends can shake the king’s hand, speak their mind in his presence, genuinely enjoy his company.

And Jesus, the Son of the Most High God who rose victorious over the grave, the rightful King of Creation at whose return every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, Jesus calls us His friends! If we belong to Him, we are the King’s *philoi*. That is an amazing truth.

Do you think of your relationship with God as a friendship? You should. That’s the word Jesus uses for it. And one of the keys to maintaining your relationship, whether you can go to church or not, is to relate to God as a friend.

So what I would like to do today is go through this passage and consider 5 things to keep in mind as you build your friendship with Jesus.

***From Enemies to Friends***First, **Do not take this friendship for granted.** This language of friendship with God is fairly common. Most of you have heard the old hymn “What a Friend we Have in Jesus,” or you remember the more recent praise chorus “I am a Friend of God.” If you’ve been around Christianity very long, you’ve heard people talk about Jesus as friend often enough that maybe you hear it and then move right along. It doesn’t seem all that earth-shattering. But it is.

**Consider verse 13:**

**13**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends

The truth is: none of us enter this world as friends of God. You have to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden, to Adam and Eve. They are the only ones who began life as God’s friends. They walked with God in the cool of the evening; they delighted in God and God delighted in them.

But then sin broke that fellowship. Satan slithered in and they took that bite and the curse of sin came into the world and every person born since then enters the world not as God’s friends but as God’s foes. The whole history of the world, the first two-thirds of the Bible, is about mankind seeking reconciliation with God.

And it’s not until Jesus that the path of friendship becomes possible. That’s what Jesus is talking about in this verse. He’s previewing what’s going to happen less than 24 hours after He says this: because Jesus is going to take up a cross and He’s going to lay down His life in sacrifice for the price of all our sins.

We were not His friends when He gave His life for us. Romans 5:8 makes if very clear that it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. Please understand this. It’s not because we had cleaned ourselves up and made ourselves worthy of His sacrifice. It wasn’t like that at all. It’s not because we were already His friends that He gave His life. What this verse is saying is that Christ demonstrated His great love so that we could become His friends.

His life was the necessary payment to make friendship with God possible.

We are called friends of God by virtue of Christ’s great love for us. Don’t ever forget that. Don’t ever take that for granted. It should shake your world every time you pause to reflect on the truth that you are God’s friend.

***Loving God or Loving the World?***Second, **Decide whose friendship matters the most.** Being friends with Jesus means making a priority out of our relationship with Him. We can’t claim to be Jesus’ friend while despising the things He loves; or loving the things He hates.

**Look at verse 14:**

**14**You are my friends if you do what I command.

There is a reminder here that while Jesus calls us friends, it is not a friendship of equals. We can be friends of God, but that doesn’t make us equal with Him. Does that make sense? Those friends of the king I talked about earlier, those in the king’s inner circle: it’s important to remember that while they have a special access to the king, he is still the king and they are not. They may have certain privileges and confidences in their relationship to the king; but they are not the king. They are still subject to him.

In the same way, while we are friends of Jesus, He is still Lord.

And so, one of the things that characterizes our friendship to Jesus is our obedience to Him. Friends value what their friends value. Jesus says to us: if you are going to be my friend, then what is important to me should become important to you. We should care about the things He cares about; and not care about the things He doesn’t care about.

Now, let’s avoid confusion about this little word “if.” Some might read this to say that it is obedience to Jesus’ commands that makes us His friends. This is how I become friends with God: I obey His commands. Like it is the cause of our friendship.

But that’s not what this is saying. We just saw that we become friends of God because of what Jesus did in laying down His life. It’s not something we cause or earn. What Jesus is saying here is that it is our obedience to His commands that acts as the evidence that His friendship is real in our lives.

When Jesus says: “You are my friends if you obey me” what He’s saying is: I can’t say that I’m a follower of Jesus and then live like the devil. I can’t say I’m a Christian, and then live a self-centered life. I can’t say that I love Jesus, and then pick and choose the Biblical instructions I want to follow and those that I think are old-fashioned. It just doesn’t work that way.

James 4:4 says that friendship with the world is enmity with God. That means that if I continue to live by the world’s values and priorities, I’m simply demonstrating that Christ’s friendship has not taken hold in my life.

That’s what I mean when I say we need to decide whose friendship matters the most. Either we prioritize our friendship with Him, or we expose the fact that there is no friendship at all.

***Staying In Touch with God***Third, **Relate to Jesus as a friend, don’t report as a servant.** Being friends with Jesus means talking to Him, being in touch with Him. Being friends with Jesus means being in conversation with Him.

**Look at verse 15:**

**15**I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Question: What would a friend be if you never spend any time with him?

Answer: Not a friend!

A friendship with God is like any other friendship—you have to make time for it. You have to spend time talking to Him, listening to Him, being in His presence. You’ll never have God as your best friend if all you do is come to church once a week. If that’s the extent of it then—as we’re seeing now--you’ll be in big trouble. But even if we were back to having our normal Sunday mornings, that’s not going to be enough to feel like you are close to God.

And if that is the case, it’s not going to be because Jesus is failing to hold up His end of the relationship, but because you are failing to invest the time on your end.

You’ve got to make time for God. Be quiet, be still before Him. Sit down and say, “God, is there anything you want to say to me?” Get in the word. And then talk with Him. You don’t need to use all kinds of fancy words or formal language. You don’t need “thee’s” and “thou’s” and “where for’s” and “there arts”. You don’t need to speak in the King’s English. Just talk to Him, share your heart.

One commentator says:

Cultivate friendship through communion. Relationships thrive with conversation. As we read, receive, and remember God’s word, we hear him address us as friends. And then we pray — we thank him, we confess our sins to him, and we share our burdens with him. We do this throughout the day, not reporting as servants, but relating as friends. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-a-friend-we-have-in-jesus>

It doesn’t have to be just a one time a day thing: like I have quiet time in the morning or say my bedtime prayers. Do that, those are important. But keep the channel of communication open throughout the day.

In the movie *Braveheart* one of William Wallace’s lieutenants is an Irishman who talks to God. In the movie, his character serves as a sort of comic relief, as he’s always checking in with the Almighty at particularly tense moments. But his attitude is one we can all have: not that we talk into our shoulders, but that we have an awareness of God accompanying us throughout our day.

***Red Rover, Red Rover***Fourth, **Remember that He chose you.** There is something empowering about friendship with God when you know that He purposefully and intentionally selected you.

**Look at verse 16:**

**16**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

One of my favorite children’s games is Red Rover. Do you know the game? It’s the one where two teams of kids join hands and then take turns calling out a member of the opposite team to run over and see if he or she can break through the first team’s line. I’m not saying it was one of my favorite games when I was a child—I was always a lot smaller than the other kids, I only came by the extra weight I have now through a lot of hard work—but it is one of my favorite games now that I’m an adult.

When we had Vacation Bible School at our former church Red Rover was the game of choice whenever we had free time. I’d go out in the church yard and yell out: “Who wants to play Red Rover?” and the kids would come running. We’d make our teams and we’d start shouting: “Red Rover, Red Rover, send Grant right over!” And it was so much fun, because some kids were real dare devils and they’d come rocketing in there and just get clothes-lined. And some kids were real shy and they’d come running up to the line and just stop. And sometimes, the kids trying to hold the line would panic and let go before the runner even got there. We usually had a few bruises and a couple of stretched out shoulders every year.

But the thing I like the most about the game is the choosing. Because every time we’d huddle up to decide who we were going to call over, all the kids would be suggesting their brother or sister or their best friend. But I’d always watch, and I’d notice the kid whose name wasn’t getting suggested. And I’d watch the way, each time we called a name that wasn’t his, this kid’s shoulders would slump and he’d look kind of sad. And we’d go a couple of rounds, and then I’d convince my team to call this kid’s name, and we’d unfurl our line and we’d call “Red Rover, Red Rover, send OWEN!! right over” and suddenly this kid that was pouting and thinking about heading over to the swings would have his face light up and he’d come barreling across the field. Because he’d been picked. He’d been chosen.

There’s something magical about being chosen. There’s power in having somebody—it doesn’t even seem to matter for what—notice you enough to call you out and say “You’re the one I pick.”

And here, Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you”. Jesus chooses. Jesus chooses you.

What does that do to your heart? What does that do inside of you, to think that the eternal God looked out over all of His creation and chose you—you in particular—to be a recipient of His love?

Jesus’ love for us is personal, purposeful and particular. Jesus says: “Red Rover, Red Rover, send Russell right over.”

***Acquaintances Talk, Friends Trust***Fifth and finally, **Trust God in your pain**. Being a friend of God means that when the hard times come, you turn towards God; not away from Him.

To make this point, I need to leave our key passage. But we won’t go too far. Keep in mind the context in which Jesus is saying these things: it’s the final night of His life before the cross. Within hours He’s going to be arrested, tried, and crucified. So the whole speech is fraught with tension. One of the big themes is preparing the disciples for the trials that are coming. The very next thing He talks about in chapter 15, starting in verse 18, is that the world will hate his disciples. He’s preparing them for persecution.

Then, in chapter 16, just before He begins the High Priestly prayer, He says this, **in John 16:33:**

**33**“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Here’s what I take from that: part of being a friend of Jesus means that when the trouble hits—and again, Jesus doesn’t say it might happen, he doesn’t say it could happen, He certainly doesn’t say that because we belong to Him it won’t happen!—Jesus says that you will have trouble… but part of being a friend of Jesus means that when trouble hits we can take courage because He is bigger than any trouble we might encounter. He has overcome!

I watched a really good sermon by Rick Warren this week on developing your friendship with God. And He said something I thought was really insightful. He said that the difference between an acquaintance and a friend is: talk and trust. He said: “you talk to acquaintances, but you trust your friends.” He said: if you don’t trust somebody, they’re not your friend. You might spend 8 hours a day with them. But if you don’t trust them, they’re not friends—they’re just an acquaintance. He said: “The bedrock of every friendship is trust. And that’s true with God too.”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuGaepk0Srg>

You’ve got to trust Him. And you gotta trust Him when things don’t make sense, and when things are going backwards, and things are going sideways, and you think “I’m going under, and I’m going under for the last time.”

In fact, it’s probably not a stretch to say that one of God’s purposes in what’s going on right now is to draw people closer to Him. Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not looking for silver linings. I’m not saying that God is allowing all of this because He wants people to pay a little more attention to Him. As I’ve told you before, I’m not really into trying to figure out God’s grand plan in everything that happens.

But it is not a stretch to say that one of the mysterious, sovereign works of God is to allow pain in our lives to spur us to rely on Him. C.S. Lewis used to say that pain is God’s megaphone. Rick Warren says that pain fuels passion. When you go through pain, when you are in the middle of trouble, your prayers change. Your prayers intensify. It’s not just “our Father who art in heaven” anymore, it’s “HELP!” HELP ME! God, I need you now!

The more honest to God you are, the deeper your friendship will be. God can handle our concerns. We can be gut-honest with God. If you are going to come through this trial that we are all in the middle of right now—whether it’s your stir-craziness or the stress of home-schooling or concerns about your finances or worry about being sick or isolation from people you care about—if you are going to come through this trial with a deeper friendship with God then you are going to have to trust Him. Take your burdens to Him. Take your concerns to Him.

So that’s it. The first thing for us to think about as we maintain our relationship with God during this time of social isolation is that Jesus calls us His friends. We are friends of the king. He paid a great price for that to happen. He calls on us to make our friendship with Him our first priority. He invites us to talk with Him throughout the day. He chose us! And we can trust in our friend no matter what happens.