

What is a Friend?

Who is your best friend? Has that person always been your best friend? Or has someone else had that honor? Not surprisingly, my best friend today is another pastor and we've been friends for a long time. My children call him and his wife "uncle" and "aunt" even though we're not related. He's been my best friend for longer than anyone else ever had that title. But he wasn't always my best friend. Other people have held that place. What about you? Have you had a life long best friend or has that changed over the years?

Sometimes it's hard to single one person out as our best friend. I saw a comedy on TV once where a husband got into trouble because his wife thought that she was his best friend, but his neighbor thought that he was his best friend and one of the guys he worked with thought he was his best friend. He tried to distinguish between his best work friend and his best home friend and of course his wife. She replied, "You're spreading yourself kind of thin, don't you think?"

The way they handled it on TV was kind of funny. But it does bring up a legitimate question. What is a friend? We might say that a friend is someone who's loyal, someone we can trust, someone who cares about what happens to us, right? The Bible also talks about friendship. King Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs and he said, **"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."** A friend loves at all times – even when I'm not being particularly loveable. Solomon makes a good friend equal to a brother. A true brother – a person who has that tight bond with us – is "born for adversity." He or she will stand with you when you need someone to be there.

The Apostle John said, **"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God."** Now, the New Testament was originally written in Greek. The Greek word that John used both for "love" and for "friend" here has a special meaning. It does not mean "enjoying the same things." Often that's what a friend is, right? It's someone who "gets" us, someone who shares our interests, our sports teams, whatever. That's not what the word here means. And it doesn't mean to love like we love our spouses. In many ways, the love of a husband and wife is designed to complement each other. My wife and I bring different things to our marriage and don't we love what our spouse brings that we don't? That's not really the idea behind love here either.

When he said, "Let us love one another, for love comes from God," he was talking about a kind of love that sacrifices for one another. He was talking about a kind of love that always puts the needs of the people we love ahead of our own wants. He was talking about a kind of love that always does what is best for someone, even if they don't like it – in fact, even when our feelings want to lash out at that person. This is the kind of love that says "no," that refuses to help a friend cover up a drinking problem because you know that will only make his problem worse. This kind of love is honest. It speaks the truth even when it's hard to hear, because this friend knows that you need to hear those things. This kind of love never gives up on you. It always hopes that you will do the right thing. It always protects your reputation. It always trusts you, no matter how big a jerk you were yesterday. That's real friendship. This kind of love is what we do more than it's how we feel. Do you have a friend like that?

Have you been a friend like that? That's a more important question. It's easy to want friends, but the kind of friendship that God's word is talking about this morning doesn't worry about whether or not someone is a friend to me. It worries about whether I am a friend to them. You saw that in Jesus' words to Judas in our gospel lesson this morning. Judas was one of his closest friends and followers. But he brought a mob to arrest Jesus. He had sold him out for thirty pieces of silver. Jesus knew exactly why he had come. He knew that when Judas was finished, he, Jesus, would be bound and taken to a kangaroo court for a trial he couldn't possibly win. He knew he was going to be humiliated and tortured and finally nailed to a cross to die in the most painful and shameful way that the Romans could think of. Jesus knew that Judas came to do all that to him and still he called him, "Friend" – in this case using a word that means "companion" or "comrade." For three years they had traveled together and Jesus still considered him to be his own.

Would you or I ever be a friend like that? Would we still love someone who betrayed us and did real damage to our lives? That would be tough, wouldn't it? Can we be the kind of friend who always does what is best for the people we love? Are we the kind of friend who refuses to cover up sin and self-destructive

behavior, because we care for the people in our lives? Are we willing to risk their anger to say what they need to hear? Are we willing to constantly put other people ahead of ourselves? That's real friendship.

That's a pretty tough standard to live up to, isn't it? Even when it comes to our own children, we have trouble living up to that standard. I have three kids and I love them. But you know what? I've always hated disciplining them because it doesn't feel good to me. It's not fun to enforce consequences. It would be easier for me just to shrug it off. But that would be the worst thing I could do for them. They need me to define for them what is God pleasing behavior – what is true love and what isn't. But even for my children whom I love, it's a struggle. It's even harder with people who are farther from me. My best friend, close friends, acquaintances, strangers. The farther out you get in the circle of society, the harder it is to be the kind of friend that God calls us to be.

That's a sad comment on us, isn't it? It's more than a sad comment on us. It's a tragic insight into the human heart. It is sin. God calls us to love as Jesus loved. When we don't, we sin. Sin is one of those church words that has a funny sound to it in the modern American ear. Very simply, sin means that we have broken God's law. In the end, all that God commands is summarized with the word love – the kind of love we've been talking about this morning. Any word or action, any thought or feeling on my part that does not measure up to that standard of love is sin – I have broken God's law and I am guilty – I deserve the consequences.

Have you ever broken God's law? Or can you honestly sit here this morning and claim that you've been a perfect friend? That you've loved and sacrificed and done what is best for every person around you, every day of your life? As much as we'd like to claim that, not one of us can. If you're honest with yourself, you will admit that. We're all guilty of sin. Sad to say, that means we all deserve the punishment that God's court imposes on lawbreakers, on sinners. What is that punishment? It's death. And more than that, it's hell. We're all going to die because we're all sinners. And after that, we all deserve hell. Endless torment and eternal separation from God and his love.

But is there no hope for us? Is there no way out? Yes, there is a way out. God is a God of justice and in the end, he will send sinners to hell. But above all else, God is a God of love. He always does what is best for us. To rescue us from hell, God made the greatest sacrifice of all time: his own Son. God the Father sent his Son, Jesus to save us. God sent his Son Jesus to be the perfect friend that you and I cannot be. He did that for Judas when he called him "comrade" there in the garden and held out to him the love and fellowship that they had enjoyed for three years. But that wasn't the only time. He did that when he stopped Peter from fighting to protect him. Peter drew a sword and swung wildly to protect Jesus and he cut off the ear of a man named Malchus. But Jesus didn't come to have us fight and kill in his name. That is never Christianity. He told Peter to put his sword away and then Jesus reached out and he healed the ear of a man who came to arrest him and lead him to his death. That is love. Jesus lived his whole life like that. He never hesitated to say the hard things that we so often run away from. He never once put himself first. He sacrificed everything for us.

But he didn't do that to make us feel guilty because we don't measure up to him. He didn't do that just to give us a good example. He did that because we can't. We are sinners. We are incapable of the love that God demands from us. So God sent his Son Jesus to fulfill that demand for us. Jesus lived a perfect life of love in our place. Then he made the ultimate sacrifice for you and me and all people who will ever live. Knowing exactly how much it was going to hurt, Jesus let those men arrest him. He let the political leaders of his day falsely accuse and convict him. He let them nail him to a cross.

If Jesus could reach out and heal the ear of man after it was cut off, don't you think he could've stopped all that? On a different day, the people in his home town became so enraged by the hard things that he told them that they wanted to kill him. They wanted to throw him off the cliff the town of Nazareth was built on. But Jesus simply passed through them. He didn't hurt them, but he didn't let them kill him yet. But the key word is yet. He didn't do that for his own good. He even did that for ours, because it wasn't time yet for him to die. But when the time came, he did not lift one finger to defend himself. He did not call on the twelve legions of angels that God the Father would've sent to defend him. He did not reveal the glory that was his as the Son of God and terrify his captors into letting him go. Jesus let them nail him to the cross.

There, he let his Father satisfy his judgment. You and I are sinners. We deserve death and then hell. On the cross, God the Father poured all our hell out on Jesus. He made him suffer everything that the entire human race deserves. God the Father loved us enough to send his Son to take that punishment for us. God the Son loved us enough to suffer it in our place. Then when the hell was over, Jesus gave up his spirit – he willed

himself to die. The Roman soldiers did not kill him, not really. Jesus stepped through death because that's what we deserve.

He paid all that we owe. That was on a Friday afternoon. Very early Sunday morning, God the Father showed that it was more than enough. He raised his Son from the dead. He sent an angel to rip open the tomb so that the whole world could see he was gone. Then Jesus appeared, again and again, to his disciples, alive and glorified. Because he rose, we know that he won. Because he rose, we know that he has given eternal life to every single one of us. Because he rose, we know that our sins are totally and completely paid for. God has erased all record of our failure to be the friends he calls us to be. He has wiped out all memory of our failure to love. Because Jesus rose, God calls us his friends. More than that, God calls us his children and he promises that we will live forever in joy with him.

That's real friendship. Jesus is truly our best friend. He has done more for us than anyone ever could. And he promises to stand next to us all the days of our lives and to bring us home to live with him forever. He promises to love us and to always do what is best for us. This morning, in an attempt to imitate his love, we here at Peace Lutheran Church have invited our friends and our families to come and hear how much Jesus has loved us. That is the greatest act of friendship we are capable of. We hope and pray that hearing how God has loved you fills your heart with faith in Christ and hope to live with him forever. Amen.