

## **Friending** John 15:9-17

Last week I spoke almost exclusively to the four confirmands and just invited all the rest of you to listen in. This week, for the first few minutes at least, I'm going to address another pocket of the congregation: those of you who know about as much about Facebook as you do, say, the nesting habits of naked mole rats. I'm no expert myself. If you really want to plumb the depths of Facebook then I would suggest you talk with one of our high schoolers, or maybe Andrea Sutter. But for this morning's purposes, all you need are the basics. First of all, and most importantly, Facebook is a website that lets you catch up and keep up with your friends. You can hunt down the guy you went to the prom with 35 years ago, or continue a friendship you made on your last trip. Or you can just use it to chat with your best friend on the other side of town. You can look at pictures of your cousin's wedding or a colleague's recent trip to the Bahamas (remember having to watch slides of your neighbor's camping trip??). Thanks to Facebook, making and keeping friends is a whole lot easier, and maybe even more fun.

The other thing that we have to thank Facebook for is single-handedly changing the rules of grammar that have grounded our society for centuries. Now parts of speech can be anything we want them to be. Like the word, 'friend.' It's a noun, right? Not anymore! Now it's a verb, too. Say Randy gets on Facebook. I can 'friend' him. That means I'll be able to send him notes and look at all the cute pictures of his cattle that he puts up, and he can look at my site and read about the amazing and amusing things my children have done doing this week, and tell me how great my sermon was. Sounds like fun, huh?

Maybe we'll have another Facebook tutorial later, but for now we need to jump back to the scripture. This week's reading from John follows directly on the heels of last week's. In fact, the argument could be made that we shouldn't have split it up into two readings, two separate sermons. Oh well, too late for that now. And besides, dividing it this way gives us the opportunity to throw yet another image into the pot. Last week we had vines and families, this week John throws a new one in: friends.

And it's a good thing that John put a label on this new image he was talking about or we would never have recognized it. It doesn't look sound or act anything like the friendship we were acquainted with. We would never recognize it if we passed it on the street.

In the first place, most of us have always reserved the right to choose our own friends. *We* decide who we will and won't pal around with or take into our confidence. And, generally speaking, our friendships are based on commonalities. We both enjoy bowling, or running, or bridge, and we are likely to be of comparable education and intelligence. Probably we agree more or less on social issues and ideological ones, or at least close enough to avoid ugly fights. We certainly like the same sorts of hymns, and hopefully we enjoy the same sorts of movies and vacations. Otherwise, what would we do or talk about when we were together? Now, maybe you are a skilled handyman and I am a danger to all life forms with a hammer in my hand, but that's not a problem because I probably have a useful skill or two of my own that you could use from time to time. We compliment each other. This is how friendship works. I like the looks of you, and you like the looks of me. We agree to be friends.

And then Jesus comes along and confuses the daylights out of us by introducing a whole new concept: one-sided friending. Of course, if you are on Facebook you've probably already experienced one-sided friending – you get a friend request from someone you barely know or used to know but don't really care to know anymore. And of course, you have to say yes, even though you don't really want to, because, well, that's how it works. It's probably in the microscopic terms of agreement we all checked off but didn't read.

Jesus' version of one-sided friending is a little different, though; okay, very different, actually. He calls us his friends, and even goes so far as to say "You did not choose me, but I chose you." But he means something very different than your unwanted Facebook friend means. He doesn't mean that we have to be his friends whether we want to or not. He means that he's chosen us to be his friend even though there was no real reason to. It's not like we met at a friend's cookout and realized that our kids were on the same soccer team, and we both played ball in college, and so we decided to go get coffee one day next week. It's not like he saw me speak somewhere and thought I had real promise. He didn't see how very talented or interesting you were and thought you'd be a real asset to him in his work. The truth is, we have absolutely no idea why he chose us. He chose us because he wanted to. That's all.

And remember that what we are ultimately talking about here is the Church. That's how this all started last week. When the confirmands stood up here and made a profession of faith, they weren't just throwing their lot in with Jesus. They were throwing their lot in with the Church, too. Jesus is talking to *us* here, not just me, or you, or you. So guess what? Look around you.

If Jesus chose us and we didn't choose him,  
and *if* he chose us for no good or apparent reason,  
and not because we are useful or talented or  
have lots in common with him,

then it stands to reason that the same goes for all of us, too. He chose us, but we don't choose each other. We are friends, but we are one-sided friends. Friends only because Jesus made us so. We haven't chosen each other because of any commonality; because we are like-minded in our backgrounds or our beliefs, or because we share a common commitment to the environment or the poor. We haven't chosen to be here together because we all like the combination of a traditional liturgy in a casual environment. And frankly, we aren't even here together because we like each other. We are here, we are friends, because Jesus made us so. It is *he* who has chosen *us* – to be his friends; to be friends with each other. Like it or not!

And what that does is shape the whole character of our life together here in a way that is far different from any of our other friendships. If we are friends – friends in the way Jesus means friends – then our relationship must be based on something far deeper, and frankly, far riskier than friendship that is just based on things we can agree on. Maybe Kierkegaard said it more clearly and succinctly than anything I could say: "to love another person is to help that person love God, and to be loved is to be helped in loving God." Not how we usually look at our friendships, is it?

Think about what that means for us here. Fellowship takes on a whole different look, doesn't it? We don't just gather in little clusters of people who look at the world the same way we do, the young adults over here, parents of youth there, choir people over there, senior traveler-types

over there, never mixing much, whether out of shyness or to avoid disagreements, or maybe because we can't imagine what we would have to talk about with a 12-year-old or an 85-year-old. And we don't just plan activities and outings for no other purpose than having fun, not that Jesus is philosophically opposed to fun or casual conversation. It's just that fun and pleasure aren't the fundamental reasons Jesus calls us together. The primary purpose of our being together is to help each other grow closer to God. It's not just the job of your paid staff, or your Sunday School or WNL or Bible study teachers. It's everyone's job. It's our calling.

Risky business, this one-sided friending. When was the last time you sat down with someone here and talked about your struggles with prayer, or maybe the amazing things that God is doing in your life? When was the last time someone said to you that they were concerned about you – maybe not just that, 'hey, we haven't seen you in church recently,' but genuine concern about your spiritual life; your relationship with God? Accountability. It's a whole new level of intimacy and commitment to one another. It requires a great deal more trust and love, genuine love, than our old, familiar version of friendship does. But living in that kind of community is also incredibly exciting.

The French poet, Jacques Delille wrote that, "Fate chooses your relations, you choose your friends." But he was wrong. Jesus chooses our friends. We may not see eye to eye with them about some things. We may not like the same music, or enjoy playing the same games. But what draws us together and grounds our friendship is something far deeper. Far more lasting. Our love of God, and our desire to grow closer to him. And that is something we can always talk about together.