

Title: Called into Friendship with God

Subtitle: Abiding in the love of God makes our joy complete

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/qL8iT7fZUbY>

Today's Gospel is part of an extended dialogue called "The Farewell Discourse," which contains Jesus' final instructions to his followers before his arrest and crucifixion. John begins this section with the words. "Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."¹ Jesus begins to demonstrate that love by washing the disciple's feet. Then he leaves them with the promise of the Holy Spirit and the gift of peace. The middle section covers the promise of an abiding relationship with him that bears fruits and makes our joy complete. This is the focus of our Gospel reading today.

There is something about a person's last words that are endearing, memorable, and precious. Jesus wanted his love for them to endure the hardships and trials he knew lay ahead.

In my years as a hospice chaplain, I witnessed numerous occasions when expressions of love were given to each family member by those who made preparations to leave their loved ones behind. Similarly, Jesus gives his followers something that will last and endure.

Given our pragmatic, get-it-done world, one would have guessed that Jesus would have given them a lot of straight talk. Andrew, you do this; James, you do that. Peter, make sure that you keep the guys in line when I'm gone. You get the idea.

But Jesus does not do this. He gives them promises that they can rely on and in today's Gospel he uses meaningful

¹ John 13:1

symbolic figures of speech, which were typical in John's writings.

But before I get too deep into the symbolism in John's Gospel, here is a cute story about religious symbolism in general, which occurred as a teacher instructed her class on different religions and asked children of various faiths to bring a religious icon to share with the class. The next day, the first little boy stood up and said, "I am Jewish; I brought the Star of David." A second child, a little girl, stood up and proudly said, "I am a Catholic; I brought a rosary." A third little boy jumped up and declared, "I am an Episcopalian; I brought a casserole dish."

When Jesus gave us the allegory of the vine and the branches, he used symbolism rich in Jewish history. The Old Testament frequently used the vineyard or vine as a symbol for Israel, God's covenant people. However, Israel failed to be fruitful. Jesus, by contrast, is the true vine, and as our lives are connected with him, we have his promise that we, too, will be fruitful and fulfill the purpose God always had in mind for his people.

In today's Gospel, Jesus states, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."² Jesus has a plan to use each of us to make a significant impact on our world. However, as branches cannot exist without being connected to the vine, we cannot bear fruit unless we abide in the source of our life, Jesus Christ. The practical applications of this analogy are worked out through relationships of love as we made connections with God, our

² John 15:16

neighbor, and our world. Jesus said, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”³

Love cannot exist without relationships. Unfortunately, too many people in our culture fall for digital substitutions, which exist only in the cyber world of the internet where social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram give people pictures and the illusion of friendships. Consequently, loneliness seems to have flooded the lives of millions of modern Americans. It’s an emotional epidemic. A recent survey of over 40,000 respondents of all ages found that 67 percent of them felt lonely some of the time. Projected nationally, that amounts to over 150 million Americans who have personally experienced loneliness. Another survey found that over 64 percent of widows over age 50 in several major urban areas mentioned loneliness as a significant problem in their lives.

The antidote for this epidemic is found in Christ’s command that we love one another, in real, tangible, face-to-face ways, which contain a sacrificial element. The idea of sacrifice is found in the phrase, “just as I have loved you,” for Christ loved us so much that he gave his life for us. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”⁴

Recently, Ellen and I had new neighbors who moved into the house next door. Our relationship began to grow when Ellen made some homemade cookies which we presented as a welcoming gift. Then, when we discovered that they loved lemon cakes, Ellen made a lemon cake. It wasn’t long before we invited them into our home. Our joy was made complete when gifts of hospitality and love were exchanged.

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⁴ John 15:13

Jesus' words, "You are my friends if you do what I command you,"⁵ speak primarily of obedience, but they also suggest a *mutuality of heart*. Jesus' friends obey him because they share the same outlook and goals. Paul described Timothy as being "of kindred spirit" (NASB), literally "one-souled." We think *soul brothers* is a pop term from the sixties, but actually, the concept is found in the Old and New Testaments.

In the Book of 1st Samuel, mutuality of heart was the basis of David and Jonathan's relationship because the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."⁶

Marcus Cicero, one of the greatest thinkers in ancient Rome, describes what it means to be a friend when he said, "*Friendship improves happiness and abates misery, by the doubling of our joy and the dividing of our grief.*"⁷ He was on to something very significant when he said that. There is something about the doubling of our joy and the dividing of our grief that true friends share.

Ellen and I just enjoyed a week away with friends that we have had for over 40 years. Ellen met Peggy back in the early 70s. She was a bridesmaid at our wedding, and Ellen sang at hers. Our relationship was nurtured because we stayed in touch, vacationed together, and shared all of our lives together.

This kind of friendship is alluded to in our Gospel today. And the joy that grows out of those friendships is surprising. Jesus had this joy in mind when he gave us the command to love each other and abide in him. He wants us to know that these things are important for our mental health and emotional well-

⁵ John 15:14

⁶ 1 Samuel 18:1

⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero Quotes (n.d.). www.Brainyquote.com/quotes/marcus_tullius_cicero_130785

being. And the church is meant to be a community of friends enabling us to complete our joy. When I think of the word “complete,” I think of the word wholeness. When others see this joy, they will sense that its source is divine, and they will glorify God for the fruit they see. So let’s let our light shine before others so that they may know this joy and the fullness that comes by being loved by God.