Sunday, July 5, 1981
WHAT A JESUS WE HAVE IN A FRIEND
John 15:12-17

Look at the title of the sermon again as printed on your order of service. It's not a misprint or typographical error. "What a Jesus we have in a friend." It describes in part the meaning of friendship from a Christian point of view, and the sermon this morning is about friendship — what it is, why it is sometimes difficult, and what some of its problems are.

Most of us have sung the old hymn, "What a friend we have in Jesus," and there are some statements in the gospel stories which suggest that we think of Jesus of Nazareth in that way. In our scripture reading for this morning, St. John's gospel quotes Jesus as saying — to his disciples — "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you."

This morning we are going to examine what it means to be a friend, and in the process, we will discover that to truly be a friend to someone is being a "Jesus" to that person. As Christians we believe that God's love comes to us most uniquely in the form of a person, the human being Jesus Christ. So, it is also that God's love is spread in the world in our being, friends to each other. That's one of the ways the love of Christ is made known and experienced.

I. What then are some of the components of being a friend? What is basic to all human friendship? The number one ingredient is trust. All friendship is built on trust between human beings. And when we sing "What a friend we have in Jesus," we are also singing about a basic trust. We are saying that Jesus will never reject us no matter what our shortcomings. And that's the way friends are.

In addition, friendship involves trust because one of life's choices is to make friends or to not make friends. We choose our friends, and they choose us. It's a free act. Trust can never be forced, so friendship can never be forced. You cannot make someone trust you, nor can someone force you to trust them. It's something that is freely given and freely received, otherwise it's not trust. Circles of friendship, therefore, are always a threat to any form of authoritarian control, because friendship cannot be organized or controlled.

Surprisingly, few political treatises talk about the role of the friend in the public order. Somewhere I read recently that when Thomas Jefferson first drafted the Declaration of Independence, he wanted to include the notion that a republic was built on affection. The people who came to new shores were free to be affectionate toward each other and to be friends of the soil itself.

Certainly, there is a basic trust much like that trust in friendship that is necessary for a form of government like ours to succeed. Once all trust is lost, then everyone begins to spy on everyone else and democracy is no longer possible.

Thus, behind Jefferson and modern American order there is a long heritage of thought connecting friendship to democracy. Friendship and freedom support one another. No one is able to force us to be friends. Choosing friends is an act of freedom and it is training for participation in a free society.

Much of our civil life in a free society is based on honor just as friendship has to rely on honor. We do not necessarily seek or gain advantages through being friends. We do not sign contracts which define our friendship.

The point is that being a friend and having friends make us better all-around citizens. Furthermore, friendship is based on equality. Close friends treat each other as equals and that too is part of living in a free society.

At the opposite extreme, revolutionaries and fanatics seldom if ever have room for friendship, nor are they capable of friendship. People involved in causes welcome supporters since they need the association and support of others who will forget everything and die with them for the cause.

A friend, however, does not necessarily share in every detail the same ideology of a cause and its supporters. — Friends trust each other enough to be able to ask of each other, “Are you sure?” and “Why?” and “'Who are we to be so self-righteous?” or “Have we forgotten something?” Friends can make jokes with each other. Friends can laugh together and with each other. They can laugh at their own self-righteousness, at their mistakes, at their pretensions. In fact, a test of friendship might be — “can you laugh openly and without reservation together?”

Like laughter, friendship cannot be organized or programmed. Friendship is inefficient. It takes time and cannot be run according to a tight time schedule. Fanatics have no room for such friendship because they cannot trust anyone that much and because they cannot face their own personal inner doubts. Especially they cannot be open enough to admit their inner doubts to anyone. The fanatic has to be sure, has to be obsessively convinced that he or she is doing what is right with no questions raised.

Friendship fits between the cracks in life. It breaks through the 1itt1e chinks where the sun was supposed to be forbidden, or seeps under locked doors. Friendship is one of the freest forms of association in most cultures. It cannot be reduced to an organizational chart. It can break all boundaries. Friendship often defies our normal human logic. We even say, “How can those two be such close friends?”

One of the most graceful features of friendship, yet one of the most threatening to its survival, is the fact that people can take it for granted. Most of us who are surrounded by friends seldom think about how much these sustain life.

Compare it to music for example. Like the Grace of God itself, the gift of friendship in our lives is part of the undertone in the bass; it gives a grounding while the treble can fret and trill. It is part of the firm ground on which a person walks, so firm that he or she can dance without reflecting on it.

When a friendship disappears, we suddenly become conscious of what it meant to us — as if the bass notes were gone and we had only aimless and unharmonious notes left, as if the ground had dropped out from beneath us. Without friends, we become more self-preoccupied and busy with the tasks of survival, and we worry more and more about ourselves e

Often when a friendless person becomes aware of his or her distance from others and the fact that he is enclosed upon himself, panic sets in. Instead of re-orienting his life and rearranging priorities so that he can become open to others, he is tempted to seek an immediate solution.

Almost frantically, the individual sets out to make friends. Desperately, he or she scans the want ads for their listing of social groups which promise contacts. What about dancing lessons? Classes at the YWCA? Or how about the computer dating service? Membership in a health club? The singles bars? But often the very effort to go shopping for friends works against itself.

Friendship only has a chance when the individual begins to become an open person, a trusting person. Then friends begin to appear in many and in surprising places. Actually, it's the same kind of openness that is part of a deepening spiritual life — an openness to the Divine. The more we open ourse1ves to the wor1d around us, the more we are open to God, the more we are also open to friendships of many kinds.

But why do some people seem to close themselves off from others in the first place? Some of course have been severely hurt or disappointed in previous human relationships and distrust any bit of openness, lest they be hurt again and more deeply.

Other people are impatient. Friendships take time to develop and deepen. They cannot be hurried or forced into a timetable.

And then there are people who are always so serious about themselves, so much involved in their own projects and plans and schedules that they simply leave no time for others anywhere in their lives. Friendship, on the other hand, requires time for others

There are other people who are so impressed with their own importance that there is little openness in their lives. It has been said that the celebrity is someone who spends a lifetime getting recognizable enough so that he or she has to wear dark glasses to protect his or her privacy and then complains about having to wear them.

The celebrity type is one who is most important to oneself. And we are all tempted in that direction at times. To be a friend, however, means to be the most important person in the world to someone else over a period of years.

Incidentally, being a friend is different from being a neighbor. Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and he defined a neighbor as being any one in need. We are to treat each and every human being with respect and dignity and to be ready to respond to his or her needs.

But we can be a loving neighbor without ever becoming a friend with the person we help. That's what the story of the Good Samaritan is all about — being a good neighbor. But the Samaritan who gave the aid to the Jew who was hurt by the side of the road need not become close friends. On the other hand, they could've become close friends. Some of us may have neighbors who are also our closest friends, but it's not necessarily so and doesn't have to be. In a broad sense of the word, everyone in the world is our neighbor, but we can have only a few very close friends. There are four billion people on earth, and it is sentimental to picture one's being able to enfold more than a few of them in close trust relationships. But this should not bother us. Jesus had twelve disciples and within this group three of them were his closest friends.

Another fact about friendship. Friends change. There are old friends and from time to time we make new friends. And there are those friends who we may not see for years at a time but

when we do see them, we can take up the friendship almost as if no time had passed. With others we cannot do this. Some friendships die over the years. Letting some friendship fade away and die is many times necessary. Often there are different kinds of close friends during the various stages in our living. That's not unusual and is to be expected.

There's one problem in the relationship of friends and that is knowing the limits of the friend as a semi-professional helper. You can heed the counsel of a friend, but the friend is not a counselor. You can get therapy from a friendship, but friends are not therapists and if they are, they shouldn't do therapy with you as a friend.

Counselors and therapists have professional roles to fill. They become expert at what they do by years of study. Their preparation forces them to work out theories of human behavior, theories that can be of help when you present yourself and your particular problem.

Friends may be shocked at those moments when a therapist does not blink an eye or stop taking notes. The therapist has heard it before. She may hear it every day in a new form. Your friend may have no more experience with your problem than you do. Furthermore, your friend cannot be objective when necessary. Hopefully you want to keep your friend as a friend. The counselor is one you see only so long as your problem. remains. There will come the time when you will see the counselor no more. It's difficult for one to change roles from a friend to a counselor and then back again.

What a Jesus we have in a friend — and what a friend we have in Jesus. Both statements are true. God's love is most often experienced in human relationships of trust. Friendship itself is a gift from God. Our lives are all the richer for the friends we have.