

Jesus and Modern Friendship

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Jesus continues his reflection on what it means to abide in him. We're going to see that union with Christ unites us to others, that intimacy with Christ intimates other people. Love for Christ requires love for community. Love for community requires love for friendship. And love for friends requires the love of Christ. Perhaps you work with "little people" all day and you're dying for community. Or maybe you're in community but not fully there. Friendship, you want it but how? Abiding in Christ requires: community, friendship, Jesus.

Community

Earlier that evening, after settling disputes, grabbing for glory, and wincing through betrayal, Jesus says to his disciples: "[A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another](#)" (13:34-5). Jesus finds this so important he repeats it: "[This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you](#)" (15:12). But what's new about this commandment? Wasn't loving God and neighbor fundamental to Jewish faith? So what's new? It's not *that* we're to love one another but *how* to love one another, "*as I have loved you.*" How has Jesus loved them because he hasn't gone to the cross yet? Let's look back: fasting, facing temptation, enduring ridicule, experiencing rejection from his very own community, throngs of disciples abandoning him, *plots to take his life*, outright betrayal. Jesus loves through that. Most of us would have left these toxic "friends" a long time ago. But Jesus loves them. How? Faithful **presence**, despite their flaws, their foolishness, their snubs, their barbs, their rejection, *Jesus chooses to be there*. Present, engaged, vulnerable, listening, sympathizing, instructing. Love one another *as I have loved you*. Now to do this, you have to live close enough to others to get hurt, to give the hurt, to forgive and be forgiven, to encourage and be encouraged, to lay your life out in front of others. Are you close enough? If not, you will not experience the love of Christ as he wants you to—*to love others as he has loved you*. Love insists on a ministry of presence. Next, Jesus says we are to love *how he will love*. How he has loved, how he will love: "[Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends](#)" (15:13). Laying down is a euphemism for giving up your life. **Self-sacrifice**. Death so others can live. Subordination of our interests to the interests of others. It's drawing a circle, not around others and saying, 'You change' but drawing a circle around ourselves and saying, 'I'll change.' Self-sacrifice for, well not just others, *friends*. Interesting, the "greater love" is shown, not for enemies or strangers, but for friends. Why? It's like Jesus is saying if we're to grasp his profound love, we have to grasp the meaning of *friendship*.

Friendship

Modern friendship is complicated. To get at it, I'd like to draw your attention to two currents that run through our modern view of friendship. Then, return to Jesus' love. Let's start at the surface and move down to the first current. Where do you see the word "friend" most? On our screens, we can invite a friend, share with a friend, block a friend, unfollow a friend, all with a click or swipe. If a friend becomes too opinionated, demanding, messy, or hurtful, we simply "unfriend" them. I suggest that social media habits reveal *a real relational dynamic*—friends are disposable. If they cost too much, we move on. If we think we can get more out of someone else, swipe. Faithful presence? More like spontaneous

absence. Is this real friendship? *Think of the guy who has a thousand friends, but doesn't know a single soul. The career-driven couple living together but completely alone. The woman who's in a ton of social circles but committed to none of them.* What has happened to friendship? A myth: "[the myth that the less encumbered and entangled I am, or the less accountable and anchored I am to a particular relationship, the better able I am to find my truest self and secure real happiness](#)" (Wesley Hill). **Friends are for freedom.** Your true self, real happiness, is found not in being pinned down but in being free to do whatever you want. No borders, no boundaries, no commitments. Don't ask too much of me and I won't ask too much of you, and we'll be friends. When freedom is our highest value, real friendship is impossible. I was on a flight to Boston and struck up a conversation with a nuclear engineer. I asked questions. He enthusiastically described his work: developing theoretical models to keep nuclear energy safe, writing code for testing, and at the same time working on his Ph.D. at MIT. Since we were on the way to Boston, I asked if he'd seen *Manchester by the Sea*? He responded by saying, Oh no, I've got plenty of that in my life. As I probed, he shared his marriage was failing. They'd met in high school, got married early, but she lacked his drive, often sleeping in. She depends on me for everything, won't get a job. I have to lend her my motivation, but I've got to give my motivation to my career, my team, and my Ph.D. I can't keep giving it to her. I've got to look out for *myself*, do things that make *me* happy, advance my career. She's holding me back. It's like we're two cars, sharing one engine, but it's mine. So after 17 years of marriage, he filed for divorce. *Friends are for freedom.* Are you so career driven that you don't have time for friendship, not even the one underneath your roof? You're going to have a hard time experiencing the greater love. Do you find yourself hopping from community to community, FC to FC? Why? Could it be that friends ask too much, *that you've bought the myth that friends are for freedom*? If so, you're at a distance from true love. "[Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.](#)" A **second** current runs through our views of friendship. You're at a wedding and your best friend is getting married. She gushes about how she's found someone who wants to spend the rest of his life with her, someone who loves her unconditionally, and you think to yourself, What about me? I love you unconditionally. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I thought *we* were best friends. After college, friends start dropping like flies. We move on, brave a few new friendships, but they don't work out, don't click; we get hurt. So we start to withdraw, maybe not outwardly, but inwardly we build a wall. And we secretly buy into another myth: **friends are for rejection.** So we make acquaintances, blend in, find a spouse, a church, form a family, a great hobby, but deep down we hold back, don't get too close, don't reveal your true self. The lonely guy thinly disguised by cynicism or sarcastic humor. The lady desperate to be invited in, covered up with busyness and commitments. The woman who arrives to church, with a trail of friends behind her. Lay my life down for my friends? *Friends are for rejection.*

Friendship with Jesus

It's in this climate of friendship that Jesus tells us if we want to know true love, we have to lay down our lives for our friends. How do we move forward? First, **Jesus affirms real friendship.** It is stunning that, even though Jesus is the Lord of love, loved the world, that he actually had friends. So in touch with our humanity, he longed for friends. And the one time we see him crying, he weeps over the death of a *friend*, Lazarus. [Jesus affirms friendship.](#) Second, **Jesus redeems friendship:** [No longer do I call you servants for the](#)

servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (15). What’s this say about friendship? Well, up to this point Israel had been God’s chosen servant. Only a few were called friends. Now Jesus welcomes *all* as friends. As servants, God’s plan of redemption was unclear, but now Jesus lays it all out *to his friends*. He welcomes us into his innermost counsel, shares his wildest dreams and deepest longings. And he does it, *knowing we’ll forget about it all*. Jesus creates friends, knowing they’ll reject him. Not just the risk of rejection but the guarantee of rejection. Still he invites them in, not keeping at arm’s length, only when it’s convenient, but welcomes us at incalculable cost. Why? To pledge his unconditional love, for better or for worse, he commits to live with us forever. Catholic activist Maggie Gallagher describes our approach to friendship as, *“You’re mine because I love you.”* In this kind of friendship, you may share many of the joys that make friendship possible—shared interests, fun experiences, even some sacrifice—but they only last only as long as my love lasts. If I tire of you or am hurt by you, I’m free to walk away. But, there’s another kind of friendship, *“I love you because you are mine.”* Not you’re mine as long as my wavering love lasts, but I love you because I’m unwaveringly committed to you. *My love for you isn’t the basis of the connection; it’s the other way around: we are bounded to each other, and therefore I love you. You may still bore me or wound me or become unattractive to me, but that doesn’t mean I’ll walk away. You’re not mine because I love you; I love you because you’re—already always and forever, mine!* Jesus. He he proves his commitment all the way to the cross. Knowing we’ll turn our backs on him, he turns his back to the whip. He climbs on a cross to become disposable for us. Out of this limitless love, this unmatched commitment, that Jesus calls us to befriend others, to lay down our lives for others, to surrender our preferences: the way the house is kept, the lawn maintained, the relationship pursued, the people talk in CG, the way church is done. Our friends will never live up to our standards, nor we up to theirs, until Jesus becomes the highest standard—laying down his actual life for his betraying friends. And until we grasp that, we will continue to believe the myth that friends are for freedom and friends are for rejection. But as we embrace Jesus profound, sacrificial love for us, we will step out in faith to love one another. Friendship is the paradigm of love because true friends get closer, hurt deeper, but last longer. Friends will fail us but *Jesus* will never leave us or forsake us. I think of a lady who devoted herself to others, who strove to bring joy to her community, but was hurt, snubbed, and stabbed in the back. She got back up, redoubled her efforts to serve and to bless, and then she was betrayed, hurt deeply by a close friend. Broken, she sought counsel from a wise old man. She described her pain and loss, and searching his eyes for comfort said, What do I do? He replied, *Forgive*. She asked, but how many times? Seventy times seven. Forgive as you have been forgiven. How do you know you’re forgiving? We stop counting the faults and start counting on Jesus’ forgiveness. Jesus affirms friends; he redeems friends; and finally, **friendship with Jesus is asymmetrical: “You are my friends if you do what I command you”** (14). Abraham, first called friend of God, did not call God his friend. Nor did Moses. Jesus called Lazarus friend but Lazarus did not call Jesus friend. The friendship that Jesus creates is not reciprocal, as if we can turn to God and say, you are my friend, so do what I command. It is a friendship between unequals, a relationship of incredibly privilege. God commands and we obey, not we command and God obeys. We worship him; he does not worship us. But he comes comes awfully close. Though he does not obey, he says ask anything in my name and you’ll receive it. Though he does not sing to us; he sings over us



with shouts of great joy. Though he is the King, he calls us friends. So even though friendship with Jesus is asymmetrical, if you consider the basis of our friendship—self-sacrificing love—*no greater friend can be found*. We are his and he is ours; we are his friends, and he is our God. *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” Love as you have been loved. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Overlook offenses. Build bridges. Choose the greater love and invite the world to know *Jesus*.