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FLAG FOOTBALL WAS NEVER GOING TO DO IT

John 15:12-17

As I was preparing for this sermon I reflected on some ancient history, noting a similar theme between my first year in college and my son’s. I went to a college where I knew no one. I was away from home for the first time, discovered that I knew only one guy there who was a follower of Jesus, but he turned out to be something of a basket case. He was funny, I liked him, but he was a total wild card. You never knew what he would do next. He liked to climb a tree outside his dorm at night and make animal noises sometimes. One time he disappeared for several days. We got concerned about him. When he finally showed up we learned he was saddened because his girlfriend broke up with him, so he went to LAX, looked on the flight boards for a place he thought would be warm, bought a ticket and flew to Dallas. He lived in the basement of an office building there for several days before deciding maybe he ought to go back to school. He said he didn’t like to study because it takes all the fun out of tests if you know all the answers. As you can imagine, he flunked out and earned an all expenses paid trip to Vietnam. He wasn’t the steadiest of friends. I was a naïve dude, and I was stunned by the level of debauchery that I encountered at college. I was truly alone, and it made for tough sledding. I was really lonely for most of that year. Toward the end of that year some guys became believers in Jesus, and I began to have hope that I wouldn’t be alone.

Toby did know a few people that went to his college, but he was at Cal Poly, a large university where he had little contact with those he knew. In the first half of his first year he also kind of struggled to find his way. But half way through that year he was invited to a Bible study in his dorm. He began to get to know those guys, and through that group got involved in a dynamic Christian ministry on the campus. He gained some friendships with some terrific young people, and that proved to be a crucial moment in his life. In his years in college he experienced tremendous spiritual growth, and a lot of that was due to the great friends he made there.

His experience and mine both serve as a reminder of the value of friends. Helen Keller said, “Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.” Another person said of all possessions, a friend is the most precious. Writer Linda Greyson said, “There is nothing better than a friend, unless it is a friend with chocolate.” I’m not a fan of chocolate, but I get her meaning, and I am quite sure that I don’t need to tell you how important it is to have friends. To be without them is to be alone and lonely, and that’s a terrible place to be. For many of us having even one good friend can make a huge difference. Today I want you to think with me about having a friend, and not just any friend, but a best friend ever. Let’s look at John 15:12-17.

JESUS IS OUR FRIEND

There is an obvious emphasis in these verses on loving one another. In verse 12 Jesus said, “My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.” In verse 17 Jesus repeats that emphasis, saying, “This is my command: love each other.” This is a repetition of a theme we have already considered in John 13:34 where Jesus said, “A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” We spent time looking at that command then, so I’m not going to deal with it at length today.

But we do have to ask, why did Jesus repeat this command when he had already made it so clear just a bit earlier? My best guess, and that’s all it is, would be that Jesus saw a need to cement in his followers hearts and minds how crucial this command is because they would tend to lose sight of it. Human nature takes care of itself above all else. Jesus calls on us to do something not natural for us, which is to love others, meaning take care of them first. He had already said this is the identifying mark of a person who really is a follower of Jesus. In verse 13 Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” He was on the verge of doing. He wanted them to remember that he loved them to the point that he gave up his life for them.

To follow him means to do what he did and be the kind of person he was. Laurie is active on Poshmark, which is an app where people sell clothes they don’t want to keep. She made a sale this week. She will have a net profit of $3. She’s making the kind of money I’ve made off my books. Combine our incomes in those endeavors and we could buy a combo meal at In-N-Out. She just told me that she has 13,000 followers on Poshmark. 13,000! She could start a cult. The problem is, her followers don’t actually follow her. They drop in and tell her what of what she offers they like. But that’s all. Jesus doesn’t want followers who pick and choose what they like out of what he says. He wants us to actually follow him, to go where he goes, to do what he says. Going where he goes means doing what he did, in this case, loving others like he did on this planet and still does today. We are to give up our lives to love others just as he gave up his life. That’s doing what he did, following him.

Jesus returned to this theme because he knew human nature. One of the things that amazes me is how often I have seen believers in Jesus be adamant that they are being faithful to Jesus, while utterly failing to see that they are not loving others. I know of some famous Christian writers who are highly respected and often quoted, who were unloving toward their own wives and children. That’s not following Jesus. I have had the misfortune at times to be asked to intervene when Christians were having disputes with each other. I have been dismayed to see that somehow they justify totally unloving attitudes and actions toward those on “the other side.” I have seen this happen between brothers in Christ in disputes about money. I have dealt with several occasions where the dispute permanently ended the relationship. In 1 Corinthians 6:7 Paul asked about such disputes, “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” Better to love and be cheated or wronged than to not love. I’ve seen brothers be unkind and unloving to other brothers because they believed they had to do it for “the good of the ministry.” What happened to laying down your life for others? If we aren’t loving each other, the ministry is a joke. According to Paul it’s not a ministry at all. I’ve been disappointed that pointing this out to people mostly has seemed to not make any difference at all.

Jesus knew this problem of not noticing that we aren’t loving others is a common failing for human beings. Somehow when the battle is engaged we forget that whatever we do, if we do it without love we are nothing, because we absolutely are not following Jesus. So he felt the need to repeat the emphasis on the need to love.

When he mentioned that the greatest love is giving up one’s life for his friends, which Jesus would do the next day, he picked up on the idea of friends. In verses 14-15 Jesus used the term “friends” 3 times. He seemed to think this was important. He made a point of saying in verse 15, “I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master’s business, but I have called you friends.” He was making a point of defining his relationship with his followers as friendship. Why did he think it was important that his followers understand that?

A FRIEND IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS

Not everyone is our friend. That’s not to say they are enemies. The mass of humanity doesn’t care about us one way or another. Friends are those we have relationships with. There is considerable variety in those friendships. Some are deep and some are shallow. Jesus was speaking about the deepest level of friendship, for he loved his friends with the greatest love of all. There are a lot of things that differentiate a true friend from others, but I’m going to point out just a few this morning.

**A Friend Chooses Us**

A friend sees something special in you and would prefer to be with you than with other people. I could annoy you by using Laurie as an example of every aspect of friendship, but I will try to limit that. Nevertheless, she is the best friend I have ever had and I marvel every day of my life that Laurie chose me to be her husband and her best friend for life. She has continued choosing me to be her best friend every day of the past 44 plus years. For 16,165 days since our wedding she has been saying she’d rather be with me than anyone else.

For most of my life I have had the nagging sense that there is nothing special, nothing particularly interesting or appealing about me, and that people don’t especially want to be with me. It’s not that I think I’m repulsive, it’s just that there’s nothing about me that particularly draws people to me. I have felt like I’m the living incarnation of “meh,” a personification of vanilla ice cream. Not bad, just not especially interesting. But there is one person who insists through words and actions that is not true. Really, if it were anyone it would matter to me that there is one person in this world says, “I’d rather be with you than anyone else.” What astounds me is that the most interesting, the most appealing, the most loving, the best person I’ve ever known, has chosen me and keeps choosing me.

Even in the brief moments when Laurie and I got to enjoy the vacation spot we were in recently, Laurie had a conversation with some strangers out by the pool. She does that a lot, because she’s a very engaging and appealing person and loves to interact with people. These people remarked on how awesome she is. I never have that happen to me. Here’s the thing, she chooses me! I cannot tell you how good that feels.

It hurts us when people don’t choose us, when it doesn’t matter to them whether they are with us or not. My sophomore year in college, the last year I played organized baseball, by the second semester I was feeling lonely. As I said earlier my first year was really hard because I knew no other believers in Jesus for a good part of the year, and so I felt really alone. But as I said toward the end of that year there was the beginning of a Christian group on my campus. The next year that group grew. But I found that unfortunately, other than faith in Christ, I didn’t have much in common with a lot of the others in the group. I was sort of feeling like the odd man out and began to think that maybe I should transfer to UCLA. As March rolled around some of the others realized this and they hatched a plan they thought might help. March brought my 20th birthday, and they decided to have a big event to celebrate my birthday. But as we got nearer to the date, the plan began changing. First, they decided we should all get dates for the event. This was a problem for me because I wasn’t dating anyone, and, worse, I didn’t know any girls I especially wanted to ask out. But they assured me that I would think of someone. Then, just a few days before the big event, they changed the location. Instead of having the event at a place around Claremont where our college was, they came up with the bright idea of having it at a restaurant in Pasadena that was a favorite of several of them. That’s where things really went sideways. They were all excited about the event. They determined what time they’d need to leave to get to Pasadena and they made sure everyone had a ride. There was just one problem. The baseball team I was on had an away game that day which meant I wouldn’t get back to campus until early evening, a couple of hours after they all had to leave for the big event. I celebrated my birthday all alone doing calculus homework in my dorm room. Happy birthday to me. By all reports they all had a great time without me. It felt really bad to me because the message was that whether I was there or not didn’t matter at all. They weren’t bad guys. They were good guys, and later became good friends. But that day it felt bad to know that whether I came to the event didn’t matter at all. I did not feel chosen.

In verse 16 Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.” Jesus chose those guys. We might think that just applies to them, but Ephesians 1:4 says it’s bigger than that. “For he (God) chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world.” Jesus has chosen us. He wants to be our friend. He wants us to be with him. The most awesome person in all that exists wants to be our friend! This is astounding.

**A Friend Loves Despite Our Failings**

One writer said, “A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you.” We could never really be open and feel safe in a friendship if to be in the friendship we had to live up to a high standard with few failings. We’d always feel like we were on thin ice. When we were at Disneyland at one point we were walking through tomorrow land and came upon two storm troopers that looked exactly like something out of *Star Wars.* They were patrolling dressed head to toe in that distinctive white armor. The kids loved it. While we were near them Laurie had focused in on something in a different direction. Out of the mass of people in the area one of the storm troopers picked out Laurie. He came up behind her and stood maybe a foot away and said right in her ear in his amplified, sort of mechanical voice, “I’ve got my eye on you.” Laurie was startled, then turned around and started laughing. He was playing a role. But what if that’s what your friendship with someone was like. They’re keeping their eye on you, watching for faults and failures. That would not be a happy friendship. It wouldn’t be a close one either because we would keep up walls so the other person couldn’t see the truth about us that’s not always lovely.

There are a lot of things about me that could be really annoying. I’m useless when it comes to anything practical. Opening packages, fixing toilets, figuring out how things work, putting together toys that require assembly. If any of those things are going to get done at the home of the Myatts, it won’t be by the man of the house. It’s not that I am unwilling. It’s that I’m unable. If I attempt it, whatever it is, I’ll almost certainly make a hash of it.

But that’s just one thing. There are so many others. I have weird habits. For instance, because of my life long history of allergy and sinus problems, I never go anywhere without a handkerchief. How many people do you know who actually use handkerchiefs? Not long ago we were with some of our grandchildren and I was suffering from a sinus attack. At one point I blew my nose on my hanky, then put it away, and Ella said, “Eww, Yapaw, you put that in your pocket? Yeah, I know. It’s weird.

I also am quite a mess. You can often tell what I’ve had for a meal by the stains on my shirt. If we have a group of people at our house for a meal you can tell where I sat by the mess on the table and on the floor. It’s kind of pitiful. You’d think I was a 3 year old. Those are all minor things, but over time with constant repetition they can become irritants, the cause of real frustration and annoyance.

There are some much larger flaws than those. Early on in our relationship I tended to be defensive. Poor Laurie had a husband who had a hard time admitting he was wrong or had failed, and that’s a very difficult thing to deal with. There were other failings that showed up even on our honeymoon. We decided after a few days on our honeymoon that we should pray together before we went to bed. The first night we did that I asked Laurie to start, and while she was praying I fell asleep. That did not feel real good to her, as you can imagine. There is much about me that can be frustrating, annoying, embarrassing, or just hard to forgive. In order for Laurie to be my friend she has had to accept, ignore, and forgive a lot. She has chosen to believe the best about me and to let go of hurts and disappointments.

The great news about Jesus is that he truly is the best of friends. He sees us exactly as we are. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Jesus knew all about Peter and his rashness and his bluster. That night Peter had proclaimed that he would never abandon Jesus no matter what happened. Jesus knew the truth. Peter wouldn’t be able live up to that boast for even one night. Jesus knew it, but loved him and wanted him as a friend anyway. Jesus knew all about the disciples’ penchant for promoting themselves as the greatest, he knew all about their often weak faith, and he knew all about Judas, but he chose them and loved them with all their flaws. He forgave them, just as he knows us, loves us and forgives us.

David wrote in Psalm 139:1-2, “You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thought from afar.” God even knows our thoughts. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and still he chooses us and loves us. No matter what we do, he does not stop loving us. Romans 8;38-39 tells us that nothing can separate us from his love in Christ. Colossians 1:14 says in Christ we have the forgiveness of sins. Romans 8:1 says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” He does not condemn us, ever! How many friends do you have you accept every single thing about you and love you despite your flaws? That is what Jesus meant when he called us his friends.

**A friend is loyal to us**

A true friend is in your corner. He thinks the best about you. He roots for you and cheers you on. He can be counted on. Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.” A true friend is always in your corner. Many years ago when I was still single I was working on the staff of a campus ministry. I was working at Long Beach State. At one point I was asked to go meet with a guy who had started a work at a near by junior college to see if I could assist him. So I went to meet with him. His name was Mike. He became a great friend. He was one of the more positive, up guys I’ve ever known. When I think of him I always recall him with a smile on his face. He was a gifted guy and a charismatic leader, but a truly humble man. But one thing that sticks out in my memory of him was how profoundly he believed in me. He was unfailingly affirming of me, and continually wanted to put me in situations where the spotlight was on me. He was always in my corner. Even many years later he surprised me when he showed up with his family in my church. They were in our area on vacation, and he wanted to make sure that he got to see me.

In Matthew 28:20 Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” In Hebrews 13:4 God says, “Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.” There are a number of other characteristics of a true friend that we can see are true of Jesus. A friend always wants the best for you and seeks your good. In Jeremiah 29:11 God says, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Romans 8:28 says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” A friend sacrifices for you. No one has ever sacrificed for us like Jesus has. In verse 12 he said there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for another. Jesus made that sacrifice.

Jesus was speaking the truth when he called us his friends. He is the best, most sacrificial, most loving, most loyal friend we ever have had or ever will have.

IMPLICATIONS

Why did Jesus want us to know that he calls us his friends? In part that’s because it is the truth. But I think another reason he considered it important that we know he regards us as friends is the effect that will have on us. How does having Jesus as our friend affect us?

IT CAUSES US TO FEEL VALUED AND LOVED

One of the fundamental needs of the human soul is to feel valued and loved. That is why when you have an experience like I did in college where your friends do something that makes you feel the opposite, feel like no one values you, it is so painful. That happened over 50 years ago. It doesn’t bother me today. It doesn’t hurt. It seems like a humorous incident that I laugh about now. I got over it long ago. But I still remember it.

To be loved and valued is to feel like your existence is somehow validated. We experience so much negative and hurt in life, and the only thing that can heal all that is to be loved, to have someone value you. That is what Jesus does in our lives. He is our friend who values us so much he sacrificed himself for us, and who loves us without condition and without limit.

This is crucial for us to hear because it is hard for us to believe. Most Christians struggle with believing fully that God loves them. This is why Jesus said we are his friends, because a friend loves you even when he sees all of your flaws and failings. Jesus sees it, all of it, And he still loves us. When I’ve had yet another episode of spilling food on my shirt and of making a mess around the dinner table, and Laurie responds by just laughing about it and telling me that it makes no difference and that she loves me dearly, it has an effect more powerful than I suspect she can even imagine. It makes me feel safe. This is why Jesus wants us to know he is our friend. He wants us to experience the powerful effect of being loved and being safe.

IT MAKES US FEEL PRIVILEGED AND HUMBLED

Many times people have said to me that I am a very lucky man to be married to Laurie. I’ve heard it from servers in restaurants, repeatedly from strangers on vacation, clerks in stores and friends. I am very much aware of how true it is. I think back to the days before we got married. I wanted to win Laurie’s heart, to convince her she should love me. It’s kind of pitiful when I think back on it. I was in my last year of grad school, and that fall I was playing on a flag football team. It was a terrific team that had a number of former college football players and one former NFL player on it. Laurie came to a couple of our games, and I remember hoping that she would be impressed by my athletic ability. Is that one of the dumbest things you’ve ever heard? Oh, right, no doubt she’ll fall madly in love with you because you played well in a flag football game. What are you, 8 years old? But that was just one example. I wanted so badly to present myself in the best light I could so she would love me. I was trying to deserve her love. The truth is, she didn’t love me because of any of those things I tried to be and do. She loved me, and still does, because God did a miracle. He put an inexplicable love for me in her heart. I am literally humbled by being loved by her and thank God every day for this great privilege.

That is what being Jesus’ friend does. There isn’t a day that goes by that I am not aware of the fact that I don’t deserve to be his friend. Why would he want me to be his friend? Most people couldn’t care less about me, but Jesus, the wisest, most loving, most powerful, most joyful, best person in existence, wants me to be his friend! Why would he want that? It is not because I am so wonderful. It is not because I am irresistible. It is because of something in him. Our efforts to impress him and convince him to love us are as ludicrous as my silly football hopes and all the other things I did. All of our silly attempts to convince Jesus to love us are futile and unnecessary. He loves us and wants to be our friend because of what is inside him, not what is in us.

Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-29 that he gives us rest for our souls. This is why. Our friendship with him isn’t based on our ability to perform, to measure up, to be deserving of his friendship. The truth we need to grasp is that nothing we can do will ever make us deserving of his love. He gives it to us freely, graciously, so we can relax in his friendship, rest and rejoice.

IT CAUSES US TO BE THANKFUL

When we are humbled and feeling privileged like that, the automatic reaction is to be thankful. When someone does something incredibly kind for you that touches your heart, you just have to express gratitude. That is what being Jesus’ friend does for us.

This is so crucial because this relates to what we have seen the last two weeks. The key to joy no matter what our circumstances is having something greater than any of the negatives we might have. When we have a blessing, a gift that is so much better than the negative, then we experience joy even in the face of the disappointments and hardships we have to deal with. Feeling humbled by the privilege of being Jesus’ friend and giving thanks as a result becomes a source of great joy. Whatever else happens in our lives, we have the gift of being Jesus’ friends!

IT CAUSES US TO WANT TO BE WITH HIM

Hebrews 10:22 says, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.” Jesus wants us to draw near to him. He’s our friend, and he wants to be with his friends. He wants us to come to him with full assurance, meaning completely assured that he is happy to have us in his presence.

Have you ever known a person who was disapproving of you and critical of you? If so, how did that affect you? You probably would prefer to not be around that person. If we think Jesus is disapproving of us and critical of us, that’s what is going to happen in our relationship with him. But when we realize he wants to be our friend, he loves us despite knowing the worst about us and he actually delights in us, then we will draw near to him. We like to be with people who delight in us. So we come to him with with assured hearts, and that’s what He wants. Don’t you want to be with your friends? Jesus wants to be with his!

That sophomore year in college that I mentioned before I met a new guy on our baseball team. His name was Pat. He was a freshman outfielder. I didn’t know it, but he had decided he didn’t like me and didn’t want anything to do with me. He had overheard a couple of conversations I had with other teammates. I was struggling with whether I should keep trying to play baseball. I knew that my playing days were coming to an end. I could see that I was just not good enough and that if I even got to play that year, I had no future. I talked to friends about my discouragement and about whether I should just quit. Pat didn’t want to be on a team with a guy who didn’t know if he wanted to be there. He thought I was a quitter, and he wanted teammates who were fully committed. I finally decided to stick it out. I ended up having a good season, and, as I could see coming, it was my last. But the interesting thing is that as time went on Pat got to know me better, despite his initial doubts about me. He was a believer in Jesus, and as he learned I was too, he began warming up to me. He got to know my heart, and somewhat to his surprise, we became good friends. In fact, we became great friends and would go on to have some interesting adventures together. When he saw me for who I was, he wanted to be my friend and spend time with me. One of the biggest obstacles to our walk with Jesus is having wrong ideas of what he is like. Jesus wants us to see him as he really is. We tend to have misconceptions about him that cause us to want to give him the Heisman and keep far from him. But when we see him as a true friend who loves us more than anyone has ever loved us, we will want to draw near to him, to be with him, to be at peace in his presence and rejoice in his friendship.