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6 Easter 2021

"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

How do you define a friend? Is a friend someone you graduated high school with 30 years ago? Or one of the 500 people that you are friends with on Facebook? Is a friend someone with whom intimate secrets are shared or a casual superficial conversation?

What if you really do not have any friends? Well, you can rent one. I am not talking about an escort service or one of the plethora of dating sites out there.

I came across an article from 2012 that mentioned a website called Rentafriend.com. I wanted to see if this was really a thing and was it was still around. Well, it is. They have an active website, and it appears to be going strong. I even found about a dozen or so potential friend candidates from Lenawee County on it. The website is very clear that it is not an escort service or a dating site.

Some examples they give as to why one might use their service:

--People who travel to a new city can hire a local to show them around town. It's always good to know someone from the area who can give you firsthand information about where to go and what to avoid.

--A common request is that a Member may have an invitation for a work party, wedding, or other social event, and does not want to attend it by themselves.

--Or someone might want to see a movie or go out to a restaurant but doesn't have anyone to go with. They could "Rent a Friend" to go with them.

--Many Friends on RentAFriend.com have unique talents and skills. They can teach you a new language, tutor you, share a new hobby, art, dance, and much more. It's also a great way to meet people of different cultures and religions.

As a sign of the times, there are also virtual friendships available.

Not to dampen the building excitement that many of you are feeling right now, but alas, it is not free. One must pay \$24.95 a month to become a member and then pay an average of \$10.00 an hour for your friend. One can readily see that It can be cost efficient to leave before the final credits of the movie.

All kidding aside, there are those of us who do find it difficult to make friends.

And there are many who have deep friendships. Maybe it is their spouse or someone they have known since childhood. As we all are aware, there are many levels of friendship.

Most people yearn for friendship. One only has to look at the popularity of Facebook which has been around now for 18 years and going strong.

The truth is that Facebook friendships and rented friendships can only do so much. If you asked the average person, "How many friends do you really have?" they aren't going to put

up 130 fingers, which apparently is the average number of friends most Facebook users have. No, the truth is that if they have any deep friendships, they can probably count them on one hand. Meaningful connections -- the kind that take more than clicking "Yes" on a friend request or paying 10 bucks an hour -- are harder to come by and fewer in number. And yet our very willingness to so quickly and frequently settle for something, proves our deep, created need for something more. Jesus knew that. His concept of friendship was not a Facebook friendship.

“This is My commandment: that you love one another, as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 I no longer call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, for everything that I have heard from My Father have I made known to you”.

For Jesus, friendships are very intimate, and Love is the key element that holds those friendships together. Although not \$10.00 an hour, for Jesus there is definitely a cost to this level of friendship with Him and with each other.

I came across this sermon written in 1547 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer who put together the first Book of Common Prayer. In part he says this about love and friendship:

VI - Of Christian Love and Charity.

“Christ taught that every man is bound to love God above all things, and to love every man, friend and foe. Thus likewise did he behave himself, exhorting his adversaries, rebuking his adversaries, and when he could not amend them, he prayed for them. First, he loved God his Father above all things...

He loved not only his friends but also his enemies which in their hearts bore exceedingly great hatred against him, and in their tongues spoke all evil of him, and in their acts and deeds pursued him with all their might and power, even to death. Yet all this notwithstanding, he did not withdraw his favor from them, but still loved them, preached to them, of love rebuked their false doctrine... When they gave him evil words, he gave none evil again; when they did strike him, he did not smite again. And when he suffered death, he did not slay them nor threaten them, but prayed for them...

For we, that know his commandments, and keep them, we may be sure that Christ loves us (John 14.15, 21). And again he says, Those that love me, will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them, and dwell with them: and those that love me not, will not keep my words. And likewise, they that bear a good heart and mind, and uses well their tongue and deeds unto everyone, friend and foe, they may know by this they have charity. And when they are sure that Almighty God takes them for his dear beloved Son, as St. John says, hereby manifestly are known the children of God, from the children of the devil: for whosoever does not love their brother, does not belong to God (1 John 3.10).” end quote.

(First Book of Homilies 1547 Archbishop Thomas Cranmer)

Should any of the archbishop's message seem foreign to us today? Of course not. The words may take a bit to get used to, but they speak about the core teachings from Jesus in our gospel reading.

The Greek word *philia* conveys a strong feeling of attraction, with its antonym or opposite being *phobia*. It is the most general form of love in the Bible, encompassing love for fellow humans, care, respect, and compassion, for people in need. For example, *philia* describes the benevolent, kindly, love practiced by early Quakers. The most common form of *philia* is a close friendship.

The Greek word for love that Jesus is revealing this morning is *agapao* or *agape*. *Agapao* is the verb form of the noun *agape*. Both words refer to the highest form of love. This love is selfless. *Agape* does not refer to a friendship love, sibling love, a parental love, or a romantic love.

This is the love that Jesus has for us and the love we are to have for each other as Christians. What might that look like?

Two wealthy Christians, a lawyer, and a merchant, joined a party that was traveling around the world. In Korea one day, they saw, in a field by the side of the road, a boy pulling a rude plow, while an old man held the plow handles and directed it. The lawyer was amused and took a snapshot of the scene.

"That's a curious picture! I suppose they are very poor," he said to the missionary, who was an interpreter and guide to the party.

"Yes," was the reply. "That is the family of Chi Noui. When the church was being built, they were eager to give something to it, but they had no money; so, they sold their only ox and gave their money to the church. This spring they are pulling the plow themselves." The lawyer and the businessman by his side were silent for some moments. Then the businessman said, "That must have been a real sacrifice."

"They did not call it that," said the missionary. "They thought it was fortunate that they had an ox to sell."

Not enough of this love is evident in the world today. One only has to look around to see many examples of those who are looking out for number one at the expense of others. Those whose rights and privileges take precedence over everyone else's. Those who will extend a hand, only once their pockets are full.

Those who succeed by taking advantage of others. I realize that this sounds pessimistic, but I thank God that so many give of themselves fully, not only to a friend in need but also to a stranger.

Those that put other's needs ahead of their own.

Victor Hugo was not specifically talking about a Christian love in his book, *Les Misérables*, but I like the description that he uses. He writes:

“Love participates of the soul itself. It is of the same nature. Like it, it is the divine spark; like it, it is incorruptible, indivisible, imperishable. It is a point of fire that exists within us, which is immortal and infinite, which nothing can confine and which nothing can extinguish. We feel it burning even to the very marrow of our bones, and we see it beaming in the very depths of heaven”. End quote.

The love of God and of each other is non-negotiable for us. Jesus is very clear about that. Those who cannot accept it, drift away.

It has been said that the greatest decision facing the 21st-century church is whether it will function as a law-based community of faith or as a grace-based community of love. Will we be defined by some carefully articulated, theologically sophisticated, "Articles of Faith?" Or will the church welcome its role as a living, breathing, healing, helping organism, known for its "Acts of Love?"

If we are genuinely to be the church in the world, we have no choice but to follow the command that Jesus gives us this morning; “Love one another as I have loved you.” Most of us do not do a good job at this. We just don’t. We need more of Jesus in our lives. Jesus gives us an invitation. He says, “Abide in my love.” In fact, it is clear that Jesus sees our friendship among one another as an outgrowth, or fruit, of abiding, of dwelling, and resting, in the love he's given to us. You cannot be for others what you are not regularly receiving from Christ. Jesus is, and will always be, your friend. This is where we start.

Start with the realization that we are forgiven for all that we have been unwilling to share and the walls we have insisted on leaving up. We are washed clean through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross for all that we have been unwilling to sacrifice for others. Rest on that knowledge and seek to be the kind of friend that's profoundly shaped by that. It will make a radical difference in the friendships that we develop. And hey, for those not willing to make those type of friends or to be that type of friend, there is always Rent A Friend. Com.

Amen!