

The Gift of the Word: Proverbs 17:17 and John 15:12-15.

The Old Testament Lesson:

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.

The New Testament Lesson:

12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command. **15** I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Friendship: the Life-Long Lesson of Loving (Grisham, Aug. 27, 2023)

Next week is Labor Day Weekend, which is often expanded into a mini-vacation, when many of us may buy a souvenir mug from wherever we visit.

Recently I had to clean out my cabinets for the annual exterminators' visit to my apartment building, and some of my souvenir mugs were sent along to Savers, with the help of my excellent young friend Joshua Sheridan, who often comes to my rescue when I need longer arms and stronger legs—and a particular mug which I was briefly tempted to include in this exile was, I am rather ashamed to confess, one which has today's Old Testament text imprinted on it: “A friend loves at all times.”

Because like many mugs inscribed with a Scripture meant to inspire us in the morning, this one had instead begun to make me feel somewhat more convicted than comforted—which is the same reason that it did NOT make it to the take-away box, because we all really do need to be reminded, especially before our morning coffee, that a real friend does indeed love at all times.

The urgency of knowing how to make and maintain friendships is something I've found college students learn as soon as the semester starts, because they are thrown into a small dorm room to live together closely with complete strangers and very little privacy—an especial shock to freshmen. But regardless of the method involved, learning to be a loving, wise, and faithful friend is a lesson that does not stop with high school, college, or even with marriage. In fact, it is a lesson that takes our entire lives.

Moreover, we know that friendship is an important lesson because, as we have seen this morning, not only does the Bible say so, but our modern culture is, rather belatedly, coming to the same conclusion—which was not always the case. In 1960 CS Lewis wrote in *The Four Loves* that social authorities tended to take the view, that “Without Eros none of us would have been begotten and without Affection none of us would have been reared; but we can live and breed without Friendship. The species, biologically considered, has no need of it.”

Six decades later, however, the United Kingdom now considers some form of friendship so essential that it has established a government ministry to help its population deal with widespread loneliness, offering advice and various resources; and in the United States, the Surgeon General recently released a report entitled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolationism.”

So now that we have Western society as a whole agreeing with Proverbs 17:17 on the importance of friendship, how do we go about being that friend who truly does love at all times?

Like many other questions in the Old Testament, we often find the answer in the New Testament, as this morning's passage from St. John illustrates: To be a friend who loves at all times, we must focus on the compassion that Christ has shown us, so that we can show His compassion to others.

Now when Jesus said that the disciples were to love each other as He had loved them, they had no idea of what the full impact of that command would be—even though the Lord's very next words reveal how far He Himself would go to show His love, not only for them, but for all of us: “Greater love has no man than this: to lay down one's life for one friends”. And not long afterwards, He literally did exactly that.

Jesus then continues, “You are my friends if you do what I command.” Which can be troubling for many Christians, because even the most saintly among us fail to follow Christ's commands 100 percent of the time, and so the misleading interpretation can be that we thus are not true friends of Christ. But that is a mistake.

Because right at the beginning of the passage, Jesus commands not only that the disciples love each other, but that they do so “as I have loved you.” And as we see all through the New Testament, Christ's love for his disciples included forgiveness, time after time after time: When they tried to shoo the children away from Him, when they fell asleep during His darkest hour in Gethsemane, when Peter declared that he would never deny his relationship with Christ and then promptly did so three times in a row.

Each time, Jesus forgave them; and not only that, but He now declares that He no longer calls his disciples servants, but friends. For in that day, disciples of a teacher or a philosopher were literally physical followers of that person—and did everything they could to make their teacher comfortable, as we see several times with Jesus disciples' kind but stumbling efforts.

Yet now, as He is getting ready to leave them, their teacher declares that they are not his servants but his friends. Which, both then and now in the Middle East, was a designation of major significance: Declaring someone a friend is very nearly making them a member of the family, the intimacy and affection are that strong.

As proof of this friendship, Jesus points out that He has shared with them the most important thing he could—the lessons learned from His Father, the essence of which Jesus shared when He declared that the two most important commandments are: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself..”

And here we also find the two most important insights for becoming and being a friend who loves at all times: First we are to love God intentionally, with basically everything we've got. For the more we do this, the more we will understand God's sacrificial love through Christ for us and for everyone around us.

And then we are to take that love, spread in our hearts by God, and share it with others; we are even given a fairly practical instruction on how to do so: To love—in other words, consider and take care of others—as we would consider and take care of ourselves.

This is another way of saying, simply, that we are to have heart-felt empathy for our neighbor—which means, of course, we have to be in contact with them. For love that is merely intended but not acted upon is rather useless. It's like opening a door but then not going through it. And with social media at our fingertips, today it is easier to be in touch with our friends and acquaintances than in any other time in the world's history.

Yet we all know that some lessons of friendship can have difficult chapters. After all, it is those whom we love most that can hurt us most, as David bemoans many times in his Psalms, and as Christ Himself knew when He was betrayed by Judas, his disciple and his friend. And often, through no fault of their own, our friends must simply leave us.

Those are the times when we must press as close to God as we can, because, as both the Old and the New Testament declare, God will never leave us nor forsake us. During those times, when we ourselves may be at fault, we can also take comfort in the fact that God, who knows us best, will always love us most. He is our truest friend.

Yet God also understands that, as human beings, we often need fellow humans to communicate that love. While God can and does comfort us in the secret depths of our hearts, there are those times when we need to feel a hug, see the love in a friend's eyes, and hear words of affection and encouragement—and, at times, exhortation.

It is through friends like this that God often has the greatest impact in our lives; and this morning I want to mention two such friends whom I lost this year, who changed my life.

The first is David Newell, my college roommate, who was one of the happiest people I have ever known, a joy founded in his relationship with Christ, and which continued all through his life, even as he was dying over the last few years of early onset Alzheimer's. In his honor, the real estate office building where he was an agent has set aside a prayer room in his memory. For local house-seekers, the motto there was, "If you're looking for a jewel, call Dave Newell" and a jewel Dave certainly was.

John Odell was another beloved friend who stepped into heaven, very recently. It is in large part because of John and his mother Shirley that I am standing in this pulpit—when I did not think I had brains or finances to attend seminary, they insisted otherwise. In fact, they convinced not only me, but the church I was attending, which subsequently contributed enough money that they were able to send me far away to New England.

Some years later, after graduation from Gordon-Conwell, there followed many interviews at churches and colleges with clergy openings, where potential employers were kind and encouraging, but never quite brave enough to hire someone in his late 40s with a disability and no professional experience—and John again inspired me.

Because when John was newly graduated from college as a history major, he had to take a very dull and low paying job in Philadelphia. Nothing daunted, he applied to be a volunteer guide at Independence Hall, home of the Liberty Bell.

There, during one of his tours, he met the curator of the United States Senate, who was so impressed that he hired John as an assistant in Washington. There I often helped with John's receptions: We learned to keep an eye out for one particular senior Senator, who had a fondness for anchovies and would go along the buffet line beforehand and neatly pick them off the *hors d'oeuvres*. Some years later, John became the curator at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, where, as a lover of baseball (an understatement) he could hardly wait to get out of bed each morning to get to his job.

And it all started with volunteering at Independence Hall. Using this as an example, John encouraged me to begin mentoring college students as a volunteer—because, as he pointed out, the care I showed them for no financial pay would mean even more to them. As one of those students later observed, a career and a calling are not necessarily the same, but when God calls, He opens the door one way or another.

And I am very honored to have John's son Jack, now at Northeastern, in the congregation today, along with several other young friends from past youth groups and from Gordon who have put up with me both in the present and the past, and have continued to be a blessing to me even years later.

As David and John both showed, a true friend can change your life; and God may use you to make a new friend, or get back in touch with one you may have lost contact with. So next week, during that three-day weekend, after you've bought your souvenir mug, pick up the phone or open your computer, and reach out. You could even describe it, in honor of the day, as a "labor of love"—one that may richly reward you beyond your expectations. For as my pastor friend Steve Holton shared on Facebook in a tiny but powerful poem,

"The love of a friend
Is a sign and symbol of
The presence of God."