



Meeting Jesus Again

WHAT A FRIEND...

John 15:9-17

January 16, 2022

The answer is Jesus.

For four semesters during college, I had the immense joy of facilitating a half-credit evening course. The course was simply titled, “Interfaith Dialogue.” Drawing on the rich diversity of Duke’s student body, the class intentionally brought together folks from many different faith traditions for conversation and mutual learning. Each Tuesday evening, we would take up one of the world’s major religions.

The morning after I led the class on Protestant Christianity, I received an email from a classmate inviting me for a cup of coffee. He had a question for me. My friend began by politely thanking me for all of the information I had provided him about the Reformation and the content of Christian creeds from the 16th and 17th Century. But then he got to the real point of our gathering. He said, “Chris, after our class, I feel like I have a lot more *information* about Christianity. But my question for you is more personal. I want to know why *you* are a Christian.”

I said the first words that came to my mind.

The answer is Jesus. I am a Christian because I love Jesus. I am a Christian because I am convinced that Jesus is the truth about God. I am a Christian because I am further convinced that following Jesus is the way to abundant and meaningful life.

My friend’s question moved me from my comfort zone—historical fact, information sharing—to personal testimony, from knowledge to experience.

I think it was not unlike what happened to the first disciples of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi. That day, Jesus asked his followers two questions. The first is seeking information. “What do people say about me?”

Who do people say that I am? What have you heard from others about me?” And the disciples are ready. They’ve been listening to the chatter about Jesus. They are well-equipped with accurate information. “Here’s what people are saying about you.”

But it turns out information is not what Jesus is after. The next question moves from observation to testimony. From knowledge to experience. Who do *you* say that I am?

Who is Jesus to you? To us?

That’s the question he asked his disciples that day. It’s the question he continues to ask all who claim him because the way we answer makes an immense difference in the way we live.

Who is Jesus? Jesus of Nazareth is the most well-known and admired figure in human history. And yet, despite more than enough information, there is more than a little confusion, disagreement, and division over this basic question. Debate abounds. Entrenched factions, utterly convinced of the accuracy of their interpretation, eager to banish any whose understanding veers slightly from it, have proliferated in number and deepened in intensity. Churches, and particularly their leaders, have grown accustomed to transforming the Jesus described in scripture in innumerable ways to meet their demands, to satisfy their assumptions, to justify their presuppositions. To be honest, it is difficult for me to recognize the Jesus I love and follow in the pronouncements of some who claim to be his anointed, appointed messengers.

And so, for the next six weeks at Second Church, we are going to meet Jesus *again*. We’re going to

revisit the stories and images found in scripture, and we're going to do so praying for fresh eyes and new light. Meeting Jesus again offers the invitation to discover, or rediscover, the one whose life and teachings, whose death and resurrection transformed the world. That's the invitation. It can renew our church, reorient our lives, and remake our world. I'm convinced that all three are urgently important in this moment, when so much of what has held us together seems to be coming apart at the seams. Let's meet Jesus again.

After all, before there were codified creeds, committees, conferences, cathedrals, conflicts, or controversies, there was Jesus. In returning to him, I pray that we will be better equipped to live as his disciples in a complex and often co-opted time. I pray that we will find the courage to defy labels that will only distract and divide us and focus our attention instead on Jesus, the source of our unity and our purpose. Yes, the answer is Jesus. As we embark on this journey together, allow me to make these three suggestions:

-First, take some intentional time in the coming weeks to reflect on your experience of Jesus. I'm not speaking here of an intellectual exercise. If you are like me, that is far easier. But rather, I'm speaking of those memorable moments across your life when you have encountered the presence of Jesus. Where have you met him before?

-Second, bring an open mind and heart each week. While it is impossible to remove all of the layers of understanding and accumulated perspectives that have gathered over the years, I'm hoping we can all seek what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur called the *second naïveté*, a return to the simple beauty of faith, perhaps the faith you first knew as a child.

-Finally, I'd ask that you stay engaged throughout this six-week series. Here's why: There is no *one* image of Jesus that fully captures who he is. Even a six-week series will barely scratch the surface. So, there may be weeks when you come away feeling that we have missed something essential, and that may be

true. My deepest hope is that these sermons will be an invitation to reflection, both within and beyond these few weeks.

With that, let's buckle our seatbelts for takeoff. We begin with an image of intimacy that is simultaneously oversimplified and underestimated.

Long before I could recite the Apostle's Creed from memory or describe the Trinitarian formula for God, I loved Jesus. Perhaps like you, I loved Jesus because of the people around me. People who modeled what it meant to live as his disciples. My earliest memories include the feeling of home that I experienced whenever I was in the church building. My earliest picture of Jesus was that felt-board cutout that my preschool Sunday school teacher used to tell the stories of the Bible. You could always tell which one was Jesus. He wore that maroon robe with the blue sash and had a beard. And my earliest understanding of that man was that he was my friend. Jesus was my friend. I remember being alone in my bedroom at night after my parents had tucked me in, and I remember talking to Jesus out loud just as I would if my best friend Jonathan Williams had been sitting there with me. These, I think, were my earliest prayers.

As I grew older and learned more, I left that image behind for more sophisticated understandings of Jesus. I read a whole lot of church history and volumes of Christian theology, I studied the historical context of scripture, and that simple image of Jesus as a friend by my side was replaced by titles like Messiah, Lord, Son of God, Savior. In fact, I'll confess it was only in preparing for this sermon series that I realized how much I missed knowing that Jesus was as close as my dearest friend, how my heart ached for that relationship, *and* how Biblical that image truly is.

In scripture, our faith ancestor Abraham is called a friend of God. I love that description. I have known some Abrahams in my life, some of God's friends. Perhaps you have as well. People who have such an intimate relationship with God that they interact as old pals. These are often folks who have lived through more than a few experiences of pain, have

had more than a few seasons of struggle, and have come to deeper faith in God through them, not despite them. For trust is the basic building block of friendship, trust forged in the crucible of pain.

In the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking directly to his disciples. Think of this as overhearing an intimate moment among those who have walked a difficult and transformative road together. Jesus knows that an even more painful time awaits—the pain of crucifixion for him, the pain of unthinkable grief and loss for them. In some of their final moments together, these tender moments, he speaks to them of relationship. He calls his disciples, “*my friends...if you do what I command you.*” And what does he command? Love.

The message is disarmingly simple and profoundly difficult. Love is the test of our friendship with Jesus. We have a role to play. Friendship is reciprocal; it is conditional on love received being shared. We may not have chosen Jesus, but when he chose us, he sent us to bear fruit, to be friends to one another.

And here's the other thing about friendship. It's something we miss when we reduce it to sappy simplistic stories. Friendship is hard work. Friendships do not offer instantaneous gratification. They are not often glamorous, and they are never perfect. They take shape and form over long periods of time and interactions that include deep disappointment, anger, pain inflicted and absorbed. Years ago, a mentor taught me that you do not have true friendship until there has been conflict and reconciliation. Thus, friendship requires humility, demands sacrifice.

In the center of this morning's scripture, Jesus gives this demanding definition of the love to which friends are called: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends.* Now, are we called to sacrifice our mortal lives for the good of those we love? Sometimes the answer is yes. We read of such heroic sacrifice, and some of us could tell our own stories of this level of commitment.

Most of the time, the sacrifices we are called to make are far less dramatic but no less critical. To lay down your life for your friends may mean letting go of your self-centeredness in support of a larger goal. To lay down your life might mean giving from your abundance to meet someone else's need. I think Paul puts it plainly in his letter to the Philippians. “Do nothing from selfish ambition, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” I think that's what friendship looks like—what it means to lay down our lives.

Over the last two years, we have been witness to truly extraordinary acts of sacrifice in the service of friends and strangers. We have seen neighbors care for one another in tangible, powerful ways. We have witnessed whole communities mobilized in support of those in deepest need and at greatest risk. We have heard stories and accounts of the heroic acts of health care workers, first responders, frontline workers, teachers, and others who have made very real sacrifices to keep others healthy, safe, and often alive.

And, it must be said, we have also seen the pervasiveness of pride, the destructiveness of division. Perhaps like me, you have been disappointed and dismayed by the unwillingness of Jesus-followers to lay our lives down for one another in very basic ways. To take actions that would benefit our neighbors, particularly the most vulnerable among us. This is the work of friendship—not engaging in debate, not being right or self-righteous. Simply caring for one another. Jesus says, “No one has greater love than that.” And my friends, we can do better. We can *all* do better. Indeed, we must. The witness of the Gospel, the integrity of the church, depends on this.

In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, written to white clergy who had resisted their own call to Christlike friendship, Martin Luther King, Jr. called our connection to one another “an inescapable network of mutuality, a single garment of destiny.” Friends, it is time for *us* to knit that garment back together where it has been ripped into pieces. It is

past time for us to drown out voices that spew hatred and justify violence in the name of the Prince of Peace. It is past time to lay down your weapons of smug judgment, to reclaim the core of the Christian message. It is love. It has always been love.

The hope I hold for the Church—and for this congregation—rests on our willingness to practice the sacrificial love of friendship.

God wants to be in relationship with us.

What a friend we have in Jesus, who laid down his life in love for us.

That, my friends, is the answer. Amen.