

June 6, 2021

John 15:9-17

Freeing Jesus: Jesus as a Friend

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June is a pretty nifty month, not only because living is easier in the summertime, but because it is Pride month. It is the month set aside to remember the Stonewall riots which occurred in June 1969. It was an extremely repressive time to be part of the LGBTQ+ community. Early on the morning of Saturday, June 28, 1969, people who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rioted following a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Manhattan. This riot, along with the protests and rioting that occurred the following nights, was the watershed moment in the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement.

What began in 1969 has grown and changed. Today, in addition to remembering Stonewall, Pride month promotes and celebrates the inherent worth of members of the LGBTQ+ community and brings into the light the contributions of many, many people who have worked to promote equality, safety, and healing for all people who don't fit into heteronormative and gender normative boxes. I am proud to say that some of those people are sitting in this room today.

While I love Pride month, I find that it is exhausting, not because of its parades and celebrations, but because the people who practice a faith that chooses to condemn and exclude the LGBTQ+ community tend to ramp up their hateful rhetoric in June. Normally, I don't insert myself in other people's theology because, the truth is, what we each believe about God is supposed to make our own lives better. But in this case, that kind of theology isn't making anything or anyone better, it has been hurting people I love for too long and I don't give it a pass anymore. Too much damage has been done, to people, and to the Church (the big Church with a capital C). And as much as I criticize the

Church, I love it. And it will never be what it was created to be as long as some of the people God loves are kept on the outside.

As you know, I've spent a lot of time talking about theology and the verses in the Bible, the ones people trying to exclude members of the LGBTQ+ community from the Church use to make their case. One of the things I am often struck by is, not only their small opinion of God in contrast to the broadness of God's love, but their belief that there is only one right way to think about God, Jesus, and Christianity, and their way is the right way. I can't tell you the number of times people have told me that I am not a real Christian because of what I believe. And of course, those same people are very concerned about all of you...that I am leading my flock astray. And for the life of me, I can't figure out why a message of inclusion, justice, love, and peace is so scary to them.

Of course, I'm kidding. I know why it's scary to them. It's scary for the same reasons Jesus's message of inclusion, justice, love, and peace was so scary 2000 years ago. Because exclusion, oppression, and fear have worked for a really long time. Why rock the boat when we can keep people in line by literally "scaring the hell: out of them? We need to rock the boat because Christians have gotten it wrong for a long time. Hell is not a thing and God's invitation to be part of what God is doing in the world is for everyone: gay and straight, young and old, all skin colors, if you want to love and be loved, there is a place for you.

That's what I believe we ought to be telling people about the Church. But, too often, Christians use right belief to keep people out. You don't believe the right things, so you don't belong. I hope the sermon series we are starting today helps us understand that there is more than one way to understand Jesus and that Christianity is big enough, specifically, Disciples Christian Church, is big enough for all of them.

The sermon series is called "Freeing Jesus." It's based on a book by the same name, written by Diana Butler Bass. Bass holds a PhD in religious

studies and is a historian of Christianity. The title of *Freeing Jesus* came from a story she writes about being in the chapel of the Washington National Cathedral and praying, "Where are you God?" In the silence that followed, she looked up at an icon of Jesus and prayed again, "Where are you God?" There was silence again and she prayed, "God?" "Get me out of here," a voice replied. She looked up at the icon, "Jesus is that you?" "Get me out of here," said the voice again. In what I think was a wise move, she ran for the door.

Bass goes on to talk about how she has heard whispers from God in prayer before, but nothing like that. The experience caused her to wonder, did Jesus really want to get out of there? Is Jesus as unhappy in the church as many people are? And she reflected on a question she gets asked all the time, "How can you still be a Christian?" After all the crappy things people have done in the name of Christianity, in the name of Jesus, why are you still willing to call yourself a Christian? Maybe you have asked yourself that question or maybe someone else has asked you.

You know, the problem with Christianity isn't Jesus. The problem is the Church. The Church hasn't represented Jesus very well. Bass writes, "One of the most consistent things I hear from those who have left [the church], those doubting their faith, and those just hanging on, is that the church of Christianity has failed them, wounded them, betrayed them, or just bored them---and they do not want to have much to do with it any longer." Maybe that's why the voice was saying, "Get me out of here." If we were to have a deeper discussion with the people who don't want much to do with Christianity anymore, they would go on to tell us that they still want to follow Jesus, they just don't want anything to do with the Church.

Realistically, if the Church hasn't done a good job of representing Jesus then we haven't done a good job of representing God. I would guess

that if I asked you to fill in the blank of this statement, I would get a lot of different answers, “Jesus is _____.” And I will go further and say that we might fill in the blank one way today, but 5 years ago we might have said something different and 5 years, 10 years from now, maybe even tomorrow, we might say something different still. You see, we each experience Jesus and the stories of Jesus in different ways at different times and the beautiful thing about our faith is that there is room for all of us.

If you grew up in the church, think about your early days in Sunday School. How was Jesus presented to you? I remember seeing pictures of Jesus, surrounded by children, and sometimes under the picture it said, “Let the children come to me.” Our early Sunday School teachers told us that Jesus is our friend, Jesus loves us...this we know, for the Bible tells us so. Jesus as a friend seems like a great entry-level way of talking about Jesus. It’s simple. Even young children understand what it means for someone to be a friend.

As we get older, we learn that friendship is more than the playdates and cupcakes of our early childhood. To be clear...there is nothing wrong with playdates and cupcakes. We learn that our faith is rooted in the Hebrew Bible where friendship with God is an important part of the biblical narrative. Two of Israel’s greatest heroes, Abraham, the father of faith, and Moses, the liberating prophet, are specifically called “friends of God.” Friendship with God is central to the stories of God’s interaction with human beings, God’s covenant with Israel, to Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt, and to the law given to Moses.

And then, in the stories of Jesus in the New Testament, we see Jesus modeling faithful friendship in his interactions with the disciples whose lives were all changed drastically as a result of their intimate friendship with Jesus. Fun fact: the only time biblical writers tell us Jesus cried was at the tomb of Lazarus who he calls “friend.” In the prayer Jesus used to

teach his followers how to pray, he tells them to pray to “Abba,” which is most often translated as “Father.” But the word “Abba” is more intimate than that. It has an air of familiarity and fondness, and the word is related to the Hebrew word, *ahab* (pronounced: aw-hav), which means, friend. “Our friend, who is in heaven...” has a really nice ring to it, I think.

In *Freeing Jesus*, Bass reminds readers of a friendship that made the national news because of a picture that went viral. It was a picture of two little boys holding hands. “Connor, an autistic boy entering second grade, was going to school alone for the first time. Although the bus trip went well, when he arrived at school, he froze with fear and started to cry; he hid in a corner, unable to walk into the building. Christian, another boy, saw Connor and went to comfort him. Then he took Connor by the hand and led him inside the building. ‘He found me and held my hand and I got happy tears,’ Connor later told a reporter when asked about Christian. ‘He was kind to me. I was in the first day of school and I started crying. He helped me and I was happy.’ Connor’s mother said, ‘Christian is Connor’s first real friend.’” Christian truly acted like a follower of Jesus that day. His actions said, “You are my friend.”

In today’s text from the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus saying those words to his disciples amid what is known as the farewell discourse. Rev. Hubbard read part of it last week in chapter 14.

This is John 15: 9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

These words should be understood in from at least two perspectives. First, within the immediate storyline of the Gospel of John. When it’s heard in the face of Jesus’s impending death, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, but to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” the words leap out as an interpretation of what love meant to Jesus. Love wasn’t an emotion; it was an action word. According to the author of John, for Jesus, love was a willingness to sacrifice his own life for what he believed about God.

But what happens when we read this text in the context of the original audience for which John was writing, three generations after Jesus’s death? John’s community was encountering increasing conflict and persecution at the end of the first century CE. When we read this passage through that lens, the words don’t seem to refer just to Jesus’s sacrifice, but to the sacrifice of members of the community for one another in that time and place. What might these words have to say to us today, 2000 years later, about what it means to be in community together, what it means to extend friendship to our neighbors, what it means to truly be friends of God?

“...I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” Jesus was their friend. Bass writes, he was a friend, “...to the ragtag fishermen and curious women, sitting around him listening to his tales, trusting for the first time that the God of Israel had not forgotten them, souls broken under the weight of Roman oppression, suffering under imperial slavery. They were not slaves, not even servants. They were friends of Jesus, friends of God.” If we think of the Hebrew Bible and the stories of the Israelites and the stories of Jesus’s life as ways, not the only ways, but some ways, in which God has been revealed to us, we can’t miss the importance of friendship. We also can’t miss the fact that friendships are risky.

Christian took a risk that day when he offered his hand and his friendship to Conner. It was risky when God called Abraham and Moses friends. What if they messed up their call? David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi...risky friendships. Jesus’s friendships with his disciples were risky. We saw that play out in Judas’s betrayal and Peter’s denial. To be fair, though, all the disciples were pretty much a mess. Weirdly, that brings me a lot of comfort. My experience with friends and with ministry is that it’s all very, very messy. What we do here together is messy. What we are trying to do in the world is messy. But it is messy in the very best way.

Having a place where we are safe to be who we are is truly a gift. And having people around with whom we can be our best selves and our worst, is a gift. I believe offering that gift to other people is what we are called to.

According to Bass, “Friendship isn’t just for friends. Friendship is for the good of the world.” It’s for the good of our communities, our neighborhoods, even our families. And I think it’s a good thing that we talk to children about Jesus as a friend because the stories of Jesus help

us define for children what real friendship looks like. Real friends stay friends, even when it's messy. Real friends tell the truth, even when it's hard. Real friends, grieve together, struggle for justice together, and they love...they love hard.

Pride month gives us an opportunity to remind members of the LGBTQ+ community that it is a very Christian thing to believe that God loves them and desires a relationship with them. It is a very Christian thing to welcome them fully into the life of this church and into our lives personally. It is time to liberate Jesus from religion and churches that exclude people. He doesn't belong there. Jesus belongs in places where everyone is welcome, where everyone is valued, and where people aren't afraid to get messy. And all who are gathered in those places are called friends of God.