

*Called Friends*

John 15:9-17

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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I got to see the latest Star Trek movie this week. Okay, probably only two of you at most will understand my fan-girly glee. Star Trek, that crazy sci-fi show that WILL NOT DIE! It's probably not even a blip on the radar of non-fans, but for fans, this latest film, which goes back in time to before the crew of the *Enterprise* even met each other – to us fans it was like Trekkie Christmas. And the best part of it was when Old Spock from the future tells Young Jim Kirk from the past, "I am and ever shall be your friend." I got all misty-eyed and choked up. Because if "The Incredibles" is all about how our families are the real source of our superpowers, then Star Trek is all about the power of friendship. Sure, they're a crew working together on the *USS Enterprise*, "star trekking across the universe, boldly going forward 'cause they can't find reverse," but ultimately what holds them together is their deep abiding friendship for one another, even to the point where they will lay down their lives for one another. (Though, this being a sci fi movie, no one ever stays dead for long.) It's kind of ironic, really, that this cheesy, futuristic sci-fi show embodies the Christian community as Jesus talks about it in his farewell speech in John's gospel. All the more ironic when you consider how Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry was an avowed atheist, but there you have it: a theology of friendship.

The farewell speech in John talks an awful lot about love. Love gets mentioned over and over again, but in our passage today Jesus mentions a new word: friends. It's an unexpected word, intimate but also sort of casual. We tend to discount friendship as one of the lesser human relationships, but I think it's very significant that he uses it here. After all, as Star Trek attests, friendship can change the very course of the universe.

There are other words Jesus could have used here. He says, "No longer do I call you servants," yet "servant" is a good metaphor for Christians. It's more the kind of image that people in Bible times would have expected. The actual word in Greek is "slave," but "No longer do I call you slaves," sounds harsh to our ears. It has come to have a different context to us than it did in the ancient world. Nevertheless, a slave or a servant is someone who follows orders, someone who obeys the master's will rather than their own. A slave or servant may also be the master's emissary, standing in for the master. And really, those are all good concepts when thinking about who we are as Christians. There's definitely a sense in which Jesus is greater than us and we carry out his orders or commandments, even to the point where we stand in for him in this life. So there's definitely a place for that kind of image. But it is not the point that Jesus is making here.

Or he might have used a familial image instead, calling us brothers and sisters. This is a popular image in the New Testament, and Jesus himself uses it on occasion, as when he says, "Anyone who follows my Father's will is my mother and brother and sister." Families, as "The Incredibles" illustrate, can be a source of incredible power. Families ultimately are the people who have to put up with you and help you out no matter what. That's very good to know, because the truth is, we are not always very lovable! Ideally, families are a source of unconditional love, where no matter how much we mess up, we will always find a home with them.

Of course, the downside is that sometimes we put up with more dysfunction and harm than we should because they are our family. Families unfortunately do not always live up to that loving standard, something Jesus seemed to understand because he had ambivalent feelings about families. That verse about, "whoever does my Father's will is my mother, brother and sister" was also meant as a rebuke against his own birth family, who had showed up where he was teaching

because they were embarrassed by him. Elsewhere he notes that he will pit daughter against mother and son against father. Just as we can often make extraordinary claims on our families, they can sometimes make extraordinary demands of us. If we're going to be family to one another, then we'd better not be dysfunctional in that relationship. As a Christian metaphor, family has its worth, but again, that's not the point Jesus is trying to make here.

"No longer do I call you servants," he says. "Now I call you friends." As I said earlier, we tend to be rather dismissive of friendship. If we are "just friends" with someone, then we're implying that not only are we not having an affair with that person, but also that the relationship is not that important. We're not really sure what to make of friendship anyway. There are friends you go out to a bar with, friends you call on to feed your cat when you go out of town. Friends you shop with, friends you go to the game with, and so on and so on. If your family has to put up with you when you're at your worst, that's certainly not something you can generally expect of friends. Friendships are easily broken, or just dropped. Friends are casual, impermanent. When you move to a new city, you make new friends. When you move to a new city, you do not get a new family. So why would Jesus call us his friends? His pals? His buddies?

Yet for all the casual friends we have, surely all of us at one point or other in our lives have had a best friend. That is a rare gem indeed. Best friends don't have to put up with you. They choose to put up with you. A best friend is not just someone you do stuff with. A best friend is someone you *like*, someone whose company you enjoy. It doesn't matter what exactly you're doing; when you're with your best friend, you are having *fun*. Ideally family is like that too, but they may not be. Best friends, however, are always like that. No obligations, no expectations, no coercion of family ties – yet that's exactly why sometimes you can count on your best friend even more than you can count on family.

There are plenty of indications that this is exactly what Jesus means here. He talks about choosing us. And we do choose our friends, not our families. He talks about joy, his joy in us, that our joy may be complete. Could it be that Jesus chose his disciples not just because he thought they'd make good apostles (because heaven knows, they made lousy ones during his lifetime), but rather he chose them because he liked them? Because he enjoyed hanging out with them? And for their part, maybe the disciples followed him not only because of his teaching, but because he was fun. "Dude, you should hear the stories he tells! I don't know what he's talking about half the time, but his stories are awesome!" Or how about the parties? "Dude, the parties he throws! All the crazy people there, hookers and drug dealers, but also city council members and even rabbis! You never saw such a party. And if the wine runs out, somehow he always gets more!" Couldn't it also be that Jesus and the disciples hung out together because it was fun?

As important as it is to be loved unconditionally, it is also important to be liked. It's good to have people that have to put up with you; but it's just as good to have people who choose to put up with you. *Agape*, that selfless love that we say God has for us – is that ultimately all we can say about our relationship with God? That God loves us because, well, God *has* to? God is love after all. God loves everyone equally, loves everyone impartially. That's certainly a very good thing, but it's also a just a bit, standoffish. Impersonal. Don't we all also hope that God just plain likes us? That God might think we're... kinda ...a little bit ...cool? That God gets a kick out of the silly things, the simple pleasures, that we get a kick out of? That God enjoys hanging out with us?

I don't think that trivializes our relationship with God at all. I think it deepens it. Unconditional love compared with just friendship. Either one without the other is a bit shallow, but the two together are just wonderful.

And if Jesus likes us, chooses us, has joy in us – shouldn't we also be that way with one another? Church. It's not just the place where we have to love each other, but also the place where we enjoy each other's company, where we find reasons –

or excuses! – to like each other, to hang out and do stuff together. That’s why we call it fellowship, isn’t it? Sure we could trivialize it, make it into the “Buddy Christ” from Kevin Smith’s film “Dogma,” but it can also be as profound as Spock’s promise to Kirk: “I am and ever shall be your friend.” Indeed, what a friend we have in Jesus!