

May 9, 2021

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

WHAT A FRIEND!

Many of us may have gotten our understanding of what life as a servant may have been like from British shows like ‘Upstairs, Downstairs’ and ‘Downton Abbey.’ But the clarity of the caste-like separation between the aristocratic families and their servants in actuality probably went beyond the more recent depictions of that way of sharing space and little else in a household. The estate called Hinchingsbrook House in Cambridge, England is now a museum. It lists some rules for servants from late in the 19th century:

- Never let your voice be heard by the ladies and gentlemen of the house.
- Always ‘give room’ if you meet one of your employers or betters on the stairs.
- Always stand still when being spoken to by a lady and look at the person speaking to you.
- Never begin to talk to ladies and gentlemen.
- Servants should never offer any opinion to their employers, nor even to say good night. ¹

Good night! In our passage from the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus call his disciples ‘friends.’ They had been students of this rabbi. They were followers of their leader. They had been servants of their Lord and Master. However, long before British accounts of what the life of servants were like, Jesus knew the dynamics of a relationship between servants and those who gave commands to them. There was no mutuality in the relationship. The servants were always servants. And the family was always the family. The servants might know the pain of the family’s heartbreaks, and even might experience them as their own. But in general, the family didn’t care to know the heartaches of the servants – they were to keep such things to themselves because to do otherwise would be crossing boundaries. Servants would carry out a command because they would lose their livelihood or would be punished if they did not. We heard in our passage Jesus

saying to his followers that he would be considering them to be friends, instead of as servants. It is this passage that led to Quakers having as their other name, the Society of Friends. What does it mean for us to be friends of Jesus?

To be a friend of Jesus is to have a deeper, more intimate relationship, first with him. In the original Greek, the word used for 'friend' here is 'philos,' related to one of the verbs for love, 'phileo.'² His followers were to be his beloved friends who would abide in God's love and have God's love abide in us. Jesus still wants his friends to follow his commandments, but to do so in order that his joy would be in us and that our joy would be complete. A friendship goes well beyond a servant relationship marked by rules, obligations, and power dynamics. It extends beyond the understanding of being 'on duty' or 'off duty.' Friendship is a caring relationship that longs for the best for each and for all. Think of your closest friendships. Do you have a deep level of trust that your friends want what is best for you? Will they rejoice with you and mourn with you? Can you count on them to tell you the truth even when it is difficult? Do they help you to be your best you? Will they work to get through that which would damage the relationship? Would they be willing to make sacrifices on your behalf?

That is the kind of friend that Jesus is to us. However, in the various gospel accounts, we notice that his followers don't generally demonstrate the same kind of faithful and loving friendship they received from him. But Jesus' example shows us the way and enables those who have been his followers to move toward being the friend of Jesus we are invited to be.

His friendship with us redefines the possibilities of relationships with others. Dr. Peter Storey, who was President of the South African Council of Churches while apartheid was being dismantled, who stood up to the voices of hatred and bitterness, says that when we invite Christ into our lives, he insists that we let him bring his friends with him.³ The other friends of Jesus that join us for the journey can open the way for spiritual growth that our friend, Jesus, enables. Presbyterian deacons as well as ruling or teaching elders, when they take their ordination vows, are asked, "Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?"⁴ Disagreements or disputes can arise, but the love of God in Jesus Christ is a more powerful unifier than anything that would pull us apart. With these friends, inspired by the sacrificial love we have seen in Jesus, we take on additional challenges.

Today has been designated Mother's Day. A woman named Anna Jarvis, who was living in Philadelphia in the early 1900's, is considered the founder of this focus, although she was none too pleased with the commercialism that soon engulfed the day. I am well aware that such a focus impacts various ones of you with different emotions. But for those of us for whom it applies, we do well to not take for granted those who may have functioned as a servant for us, in order to move the relationship in the direction of being a cherished friend. As pointed out in a FaceBook post by my friend, Denise Anderson, who is a mother and a fellow pastor, it is good to know some of the history related to this day that has sought to lift a variety of people out of subservience. She points out that Mother's Day founder, Anna Jarvis, was inspired by her mother's efforts setting up what were called Mother's day work clubs that served as agents of reconciliation between Union and Confederate families after the Civil War. Anna's mother had been inspired by Julia Ward Howe, who initiated a Mother's Peace Day in an effort to protest against the killing of other mothers' children in war. And just a little over a month after Coretta Scott King's husband's assassination in 1968, she led a march tying Mother's Day to gender justice and access to childcare. Such have been some of the efforts to lift those who have been servants into the status of friends.

Beloved friends of Jesus, the relationships with God and with one another that are offered us are not those of insensitivity, oppression, and burden. Instead, God wants us to have nurturing relationships of joy, caring, and purpose. We are presented with the prospect of truthful relationships that build up toward what is peaceful, just, and right. There is One who has modeled for us fruitful relationships that create the possibility for us to move toward becoming a beloved community. What grand possibilities! What a friend we have in Jesus! Amen.

¹ www.Hinchhouse.org.uk

² Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume IX

³ From a sermon by L. Bevel Jones, http://day1.org/514-faith_friendship_and_fruitfulness/undefined

⁴ From the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order

