

John 15:9-17
Proverbs 18:24
“More than Servants, Closer than Kin”

Rev. David Pierce
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I'm grateful to Shelby for leading us in worship today. I don't know what the voice of Jesus sounded like when he gave us this command to love one another, but I don't have to work very hard to believe he sounded a lot like her.

Upon first hearing, it sounds like a much better deal for the disciples. "I no longer call you servants, but friends." For who wouldn't rather be a friend than a servant? The servant is told, "Go here, do this." The friend is asked, "Would you like to go on a picnic?" The servant sleeps out in the servant quarters and eats whatever scraps come out of the kitchen. The friend is given their choice of beds and linens and told to make themselves at home, to take what they want from the refrigerator. More than this, the servant does not know what their master is going to say or do next. At a moment's notice, the servant can be woken from their sleep. Their dreams are the one and only place where they enjoy freedom, where the servant gets to walk the earth unfettered, but the master does not care about this. The master does not have to consider how hard the servant has it, but only whether the servant could make things easier for their master.

There are, we know, circumstances under which masters have been known to treat their servants as better than servants, giving them gifts at Christmas, giving them a seat at the table with all the family, but always, always, always, the servant knows they are at the table only because they have been permitted. They could not have come on their own, and at any minute they could be told to get up, go away.

I have a thing for cemeteries. You have probably figured this out by now. I like to walk through them and read the headstones, because you can learn a lot about a person based on what the headstone says. If you look at when they were born and when they died then you also know when they lived, and you know they lived during a time of war, and they must have had a hard life. You can also see who they are buried with. Who else's name is etched on the headstone? Were they married? Did they have children? Who cared about them in life? To whom did they belong? And of course, I like to read the epitaphs, to see what's been said about them in summary.

Some of the most interesting cemeteries to me are ones where you find the graves of former slaves, often found along routes where battles of the American Revolution and the Civil War were fought. Many years ago, I came across one such cemetery while visiting Fredericksburg, Virginia. As is often the case, this cemetery had two sections to it, one for slaves and one for non-slaves. In this second section was a plot of graves, about 5 headstones, for a family named Jackson. The largest of the headstones had the name of a man and his wife, presumably Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. Next to them, I remember, was one for their son and it also had the name of his wife on it. There was also a small headstone for a daughter who had died in childbirth. The one that struck me in particular, though, was the last of the headstones. It had a name on it, which I don't recall, and underneath the name the words, "Their faithful slave." My first reaction was one of endearment, thinking perhaps that this slave, though a slave, must have been more like a family member to the Jacksons, who must have seen fit to provide a proper burial for them. But then I also wondered what it said about power and how hard it is for the powerful to let go of what they have. In writing to the church at Galatia and later to the church at Rome, the Apostle says, "In Christ there is neither slave nor free, for in Christ all are one, and in Christ there is no condemnation, not even in death." In death there is Christ and in Christ there is neither slave nor free. What were the Jacksons doing if not maybe voicing their disagreement with Paul and holding onto their power even in the grave?

When I was growing up I was taught in church that Jesus is my friend. We too sang "*What a Friend We Have in Jesus*," but we also sang hymns with titles like, "*Trust and Obey*," and "*Onward Christian Soldiers*:" Christ the royal master / Leads against the foe / Forward into battle / See His banners go. A set of lyrics that admittedly confused things for me. Was Jesus my friend or my master drill sergeant?

I learned that Jesus was my friend, my best friend actually, a savior who loved me so much that he died on a cross to forgive me of all that I could not possibly forgive myself of. And like a best friend, he would be there to listen when I prayed, to share all my sorrows, and to know my every weakness, as we sang just a moment ago. But unlike a friend, or at least a good friend, I also got an understanding of Jesus as being someone who could turn his back on me, who would punish me to hell if I wasn't a good enough friend in return. That if I didn't always trust and obey him, he would, like a master, show his disapproval

and maybe never like or love me the same way again. And so, in my 38 years, all of which have been spent in the church, I have probably given more credence to the idea of being a good servant than to being a good friend. And I have probably heard more sermons about being a servant than about being a friend. In the church, we talk about service all the time. It may be the thing we talk about the most.

Who can come out next week to help serve the hungry?

Who will serve as Sunday School teachers?

Who can help serve as an usher in a few weeks? We need ushers and we don't have them. Who will serve?

Serve, serve, serve, serve, serve. Jesus said, let the one who is greatest among you be a servant of all. But we must be careful with this word, because service can turn into a system of hierarchy and betterment and, dare I say oppression? For in service, there is the person who serves and the person who receives. The person who has and the person who has not, and this kind of relationship can make some of us think more of ourselves than we ought to. Even in the church, and perhaps especially in the church, we fall prey to making too much of service. We build our understanding of mission only around who can do what, or how much money we have and who are we going to give it to. And this sets up false categories of distinction among us as we try to figure out who deserves to receive our services and who doesn't. We speak of the poor and the deserving poor, and we call ourselves the servants, while we all the time play the master. But the church of Jesus Christ must refuse to play along any longer. We must resist our own tendencies towards power and dominance, and confess that we are not as humble as we think we are, and we must work to change the system. We must put aside our conventional understandings of power as unilateral and adopt instead a power based on mutuality. So that it is no longer, I will tell you and you will listen because I am me and you are you, but instead it is, tell me who you are and I will tell you who I am and we will know one another only as we are together. For Jesus says, I no longer call you servants, but friends. And if the one who had more to give than all the rest of us combined still treated us as friends and not as servants, how much more so should we?

But being friends, we know, is far messier and complicated than being servants. It does not have any of the clear-cut lines that come with knowing who is giving orders and who is taking them. Friendship can carry with it denial, betrayal, and disappointment. Unlike service, which requires only a willingness to give, friendship requires that we also receive. Therefore, the chances of not getting what we want is much higher with friendship than with service. Friendship can lead to crosses and to people hanging on them. But still Jesus says, I call you friends, which is how we know that friendship is sacrifice and sacrifice is love.

This past Thursday evening I attended the opening of a photo gallery at the Edward Kennedy Institute in Boston called “Standing with Immigrants.” The gallery featured 18 individuals and their stories of migration. If you are not familiar with this gallery, I encourage you to check it out online, or better yet, go see it. It’s on display from now until the end of May. As part of the opening, a few of the individuals who were photographed for the gallery came to speak that night, to share first-hand their immigrant experience. Among them was a woman from Burma named Thi Thi Nye. Thi Thi first came to the United States in 2005 as a refugee when she fled civil war in her home country of Myanmar. She recalled how the conversation went the day she had to speak with a U.S. Customs Officer about her refugee status.

“It says here that your name is Thi Thi.”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“There’s already someone with your name in the U.S., someone who is also from Burma. Are you sure you’re not already living in the U.S.?”

Thi Thi went on to explain how in Myanmar culture, babies, when they are born, are not given family names. Rather, everyone is given a name that corresponds with anything from the day of the week you were born on to what flowers were growing outside the window of the delivery room.

“In Burma families can be quite large, and many families have now been separated by years of war,” Thi Thi told us on Thursday night. “And there are thousands of women named Thi Thi. You can be in a room filled with your cousins and grandparents and not know them, because no one shares the same name.”

When Thi Thi finished telling her story, there was an opportunity to ask questions and a woman stood up in the back row.

“Here you are, thousands of miles away from your home, living in a foreign land, just one Thi Thi among many. How do you see yourself and how do you see the people around you?”

“When you don’t know who your family is, you can look at everyone as being a possible family member, and that’s how I try to see everyone.”

Jesus wants us to know today that he no longer sees us as servants, but as friends. The book of Proverbs, however, known for its wise one-liners, says you got to be careful even about friends, because some friends play will play you, but a true friend sticks closer than kin.

Yes, some friends will play you. Thankfully, around here, we’re more than friends. We’re kin...family. Let us always make it so. Amen.