



*Endless Road*, 1971 painting by Margaret Hofheniz-Doring, she says: "there aren't any ordinary people in the world; everyone is extraordinary because everyone has been created by God and is someone to reverence."

May 5, 2024

**John 15:9-17**

15:9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

15:10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

15:11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

15:12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

15:13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

15:14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

15:15 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.

15:16 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.

15:17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

**Friends of God**

*Prayer: O God of love, embrace us, immerse us, bless us. For in your love, we live and move and have our being...*

When I traveled in Europe as a young person, I was interested to find that no one that I spoke with claimed to know anything about religion. I was not taking a scientific poll; I was just chatting with people that I met. In England, when I asked about the church on the corner, I was told that it had a history too lofty to be repeated by anyone from around here. They did not even try to tell the story; they suggested I go to the library to look it up. The church they walked past every day.

If you asked someone what they believed about God, they would say they did not know, they would need to ask their priest what they believed. Casually, I asked a French woman in her mid-30's what her religious background was -- she told me she did not know, she would have to ask her

grandmother. (I thought I was asking about her own recollections...) She came back a week later and repeated what her grandmother told her...

Americans on the other hand, seem to feel that in their bones, they know everything there is to know about faith; whether or not they participate in a spiritual community. You might be surprised how many people who go to church much less often than you do, think they know more than you. Who may dismiss us as deluded or simple.

Jesus said in verse 15, "I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father..." Jesus' life is God revealed. Made known. There is something to know here. We are challenged to interrogate what it means to love our neighbor; to be a friend of God.

This is a big moment in John's gospel, right before Jesus heads into the events of Holy week, he is speaking with his disciples and he has told them that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will come after he leaves to remain with them, he is the vine you are the branches, a new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you.<sup>1</sup> Last week we worked through 1 John as a kind of commentary on this verse. "Beloved, let us love one another." Here Jesus says it plainly, no longer are you servants but now you are friends.

Pound for pound, there is more servant imagery in scripture than there is friendship imagery. Isaiah speaks of the suffering servant; in the Gospels the servant/master relationship is inverted to describe the ultimate justice in the Kingdom of God. But friendship with God is groundbreaking. And there is not a lot of it. God tries to get close to Moses, but Moses must shield his eyes from God's glory. Jesus is moving from inversions to a horizontal power structure. (The Society of Friends were so moved by this that the Quakers named their religious movement after it, calling one another "friend.") Jesus is no longer calling his disciples servants, because servants do not always have insight into the long view of their Lord's intent, now he calls them friends. Friends know one another's hearts, they know each other's shortcomings, and they know their strengths, they know how they can rely on each other – you are God's friends. Friends work alongside, partnering with Jesus.

Christian Ethicist Margaret Farley, one of my Professors at Yale Divinity School has written that theologically we are still developing a "universal call to holiness..." She says that "Thomas Aquinas argued in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that it is a matter of 'precept', of moral obligation, that all are called to love with a whole heart, with the implication that this is possible in all walks of life."<sup>2</sup> She is a nun. Arguing that a holy life is possible in any life circumstance. Again, arguing in favor of a horizontal power structure. God uses people in all walks of life; we know this. It is mundane, and it is revolutionary.

To be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, someone who is a disciple, means that there are some things that for us are not optional. A member of the Sierra Club is not one who with malice aforethought degrades the environment. A member of the Boy Scouts can be relied upon to build a campfire – they all learn to. These are reasonable associations. Likewise, a disciple of Jesus is someone who, seeks to respond to other people as Jesus responded. In solidarity with Jesus' life, teachings, intentions. And Jesus has commanded us to love, in every situation. He is not mysterious

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<sup>1</sup> John 14-15

<sup>2</sup> Changing the Questions: Explorations in Christian Ethics, Margaret A. Farley 2015, Orbis Books p. 233

about this with his friends—Christianity is simply about the quality of the love that you show to the people who know you. God is love. Love one another. It is what we know of God. In all walks of life, in all seasons of life.

When I was a student, I will confess that in between classes, I was among those protesting our college's investments in South Africa. Right outside the Administration building. You know -- where they could see us and hear us. There was a lot of singing of protest songs, and speeches. (Singing and talking; talking and singing...maybe a moment of silence for those suffering...if that sounds familiar it's because that is also what we do in church) It did not happen immediately, but they did divest their South African investments...eventually. Those demonstrations went on for years. Desmond Tutu, who received the Nobel Peace prize in 1984, spoke to a student group in 1985 at UCLA and said:

“Don't let anyone delude you into believing that what you do today is of little moment,” ... “Don't let them say to you and then believe it that it's merely a matter that doesn't even embarrass the South African government. I want you to know that you are giving very considerable encouragement to the victims of one of the most vicious systems the world has ever known.”<sup>3</sup>

It meant a lot to me at the time. Desmond Tutu was telling students that their protests mattered. All of us who demonstrated then are much older now.

Today, the student protests are about the plight of the people living in the West Bank and Gaza. I have been interested to watch the coverage of the student-led demonstrations. The coverage often takes the angle of the threat they post to campus security. Columbia students were reported as chanting, to the police (who somebody called in... who was that?): “There is no riot here, why are you in riot gear?”

I have a daughter in college, with two weeks left of school, they have a few hundred students in tents out on their green. I reminded her of the importance of keeping demonstrations non-violent. It is common for counter-protestors to incite violence in an ongoing protest, which then becomes the story. The security angle again. It is a big red herring. A way to discredit the students and their voices. The opposition wants this to be a story about crazy, unruly students, the students on the other hand, are calling attention to the plight of those suffering. And these protests have an impact on administrations, politicians, and diplomatic solutions. Who are God's friends in these protests?

Here is the other thing that is true. Those students will grow up and enter the adult world, shortly. Today they are students, tomorrow they will be leaders. It is a horizontal power structure. Sounds like ... Jesus. Remember where he says that his disciples are not servants any longer, but now they are friends? The students will grow up and find their voices; just as the bumbling disciples grew into Apostles bringing the good news to the world.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-05-10-mn-18094-story.html>

So many times, all those experts out there, the ones who do not come to church like you do, seem to think religious life is a series of “shoulds,” “oughts,” and “musts.” They will tell you: it is all up to us to do this right, or right will not be done.

There is a lot of injustice in the world. But friends of Jesus know that Jesus comforts the struggling, fearful, anxious -- telling them, in effect, relax...you did not choose me. I chose you...to go and bear fruit.

We did not choose Jesus, Jesus chose us. He invites us to be his friends, friends of God, friends of his work in our world, friends to one another. And Jesus intends to bless the world through us. Jesus calls his friends to love this world, the way that he did. When Jesus called his disciples his friends, he did it at the same time he commanded them to love one another.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

This is a lifestyle. God loves you; God chose to make you his friends, with this love alive in your life, God is blessing the world.

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