

“Jesus of Nazareth – The Annoying Friend”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

13 March 2022

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Texts: Mark 10:35-37, 41-45

John 15:12-17

“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

- John 15:14

Prayer

God-among-us,

Grant us listening ears, open minds and humble hearts

In this sacred time of meditation.

Speak to your people

So when we return to our lives outside this time of worship

your life-giving Word may continue to speak through us.

In Christ, we pray. Amen.

There is a story in the Buddhist tradition about a monk who was misinterpreting the Dharma, the most fundamental teachings of the Buddha. Concerned that their brother might be passing along to others a distorted understanding of the Dharma, the other monks tried to show him that despite his deep devotion for the Buddha's teachings, he was lost in the fog of the words and was missing the true spirit of the Dharma entirely. The monk remained unpersuaded and stood by his own views.

After being informed of the situation, the Buddha summoned the monk and shared this bit of wisdom with his headstrong disciple. A person who is studying his teachings, the Buddha said, is like a man trying to catch a poisonous snake in the wild. If he reaches out his hand to grasp the snake, the snake may bite his hand or his legs. Trying to catch the snake that way has no advantages and only creates suffering, even death. But a thoughtful disciple is like the man who comes upon the venomous snake in the wild, but rather than picking it up with his bare hands, he first finds a forked stick and puts it right behind the snake's head. Then he holds the snake firmly behind its jaws and lifts it up. This way, the man will have the snake in his hand and even if the snake winds itself around the man's arm, it will not bite him.

The Buddha warned his follower that spiritual ideas that shape the human soul and mind can be a dangerous thing. They can heal, offer wisdom and give life, but they can also have a poisonous bite and do significant damage if they are not handled with great care. If a disciple holds the Dharma incorrectly, the Buddha continued, they can very easily take the teachings the opposite way of what was intended and, instead of achieving and offering spiritual liberation, they sow confusion, misrepresent the sacred

writings, cause pain to themselves and their community, and slander the Buddha himself.ⁱ

It appears, at least according to a new national survey commissioned by the Episcopal Church and released last Wednesday, that during this Lenten season, rather than giving up coffee or social media for Lent, Christians in America have to engage in a serious and intentional soul-searching to discern whether we are the kind of thoughtful disciples that understand Jesus and practice the true spirit of the Gospel or if we are misinterpreting Jesus' teachings and turning the Gospel into something completely different from what Jesus had in mind. The new study of the Episcopal Church, which is called "*Jesus in America*,"ⁱⁱ shows the latter to be the widespread perception shared by non-Christians and religious unaffiliated Americans. While the vast majority of American adults still believe that Jesus is an influential and compelling spiritual figure, most non-Christians and those without any religious affiliation indicated in the research that in their opinion Christians do not live up to Jesus' teachings. In fact, non-Christian respondents defined Christians as hypocritical, arrogant, judgmental, and self-righteous. Those descriptors changed dramatically when Christians were asked to describe other Christians. We prefer thinking of ourselves as a compassionate, respectful, friendly, loving, and giving bunch.ⁱⁱⁱ But the numbers in the survey do not lie; they show an undeniable disconnect between people's perception of Jesus and their opinion about us, Jesus' disciples. For many of the people who are not in the church today, we are the kind of disciples that do not represent well or not at all the values and teachings of Jesus Christ.

As hard as it is for me to say this, there is nothing particularly earth-shattering in the findings of this new survey. For most of the last 2000 years of Christian history, people have whispered it amongst themselves, shouted it out loud, denounced it publicly, bemoaned it in private, written about it and have wrestled with the reality that the behavior and attitude of Jesus' disciples do not always bear out the demanding teachings of Jesus. In the Gospels, the disciples were willing to give up everything to follow Jesus. They dropped their fishing nets by their boats, left their jobs behind, and walked away from their families and lives to go on the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and yet, time and over again, the first disciples struggled to understand Jesus' core message, mission and nature. One of the quotes attributed to Gandhi speaks about this conspicuous gap between Christ and his followers. Supposedly, while talking to a Christian missionary in India who wondered why Gandhi would not become a follower of Christ, Gandhi said, "***Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It is just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ.***"^{iv} Author Anne Lamott wastes no time in getting to the theological bottom of this truth about the disciples' failure to handle Jesus' teachings better, more cautiously and more faithfully. Lamott says, "***You've got to love this God—consistently assembling the motleyest [crew of accomplices to do God's work in the world.] It's a centuries-long reality show—Moses the stutterer, Rahab the hooker, David the adulterer, Mary the homeless teenager. Not to mention all the mealy-mouthed disciples. Not to mention a raging insecure narcissist like me. I don't know why God picks***

cowards and mealy-mouths and narcissists to carry God's word. But God always does.^v

Whenever opinion polls remind me of how far the institutional Church still is from living up to the spirit of the Gospel, and there have been many of these surveys over the last 20 years, I remember Lamott's words and tell myself that it was God's idea, not mine, to make the Church, not out of spiritually enlightened heroes, but out of imperfect, broken, weak-kneed, thickheaded, and unexceptional disciples like you and me. But I am always grateful for the voices in our society that expect more, not less, from the people who claim to have Jesus as their role model, their Lord, Teacher, Savior and Friend.

Jesus certainly set a high bar for his followers. New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine makes a thought-provoking comment in her book *"The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus."* She notes that ***"today Jesus' words are too familiar, too domesticated, too stripped of their initial edginess and urgency."*** This is undoubtedly true in the Church where we hear the Gospels read out loud every week and participate in weekly Bible study. But Levine says that rather than parroting his words, Jesus hoped that we would hold his teachings in our hearts and minds and enact them with all our strength. She then concluded, ***"To understand Jesus, he must be seen as provocative enough both to prompt some to leave their homes and families and to follow him and to prompt others to regard him as insane... This means, at the very least, that his message is not an easy one to follow... A domesticated Jesus whose primary role is to make one 'feel good' or 'feel saved' is not a Jewish Jesus – and not a historical Jesus."***^{vi}

The very Jewish and very much historical Jesus never lost his edginess. Jesus continued to surprise his followers even on the night of their last supper together. This was the very night when one of his disciples would betray him and Jesus would be arrested. The crucifixion was looming large on the horizon. Sensing the closeness of his own death, Jesus gathered all his followers in the same room and the first thing he did was ***"to lay aside his outer garments"***^{vii} and wash their feet. Right there and then, Jesus modeled the kind of community he hoped his disciples would embrace, nurture and encourage. In the foot washing, Jesus gave up his status as the teacher and rabbi. He let go of his position of power. He shed himself of any privilege he might have within the community of disciples. Then Jesus took on the role of a servant and washed the disciples' feet to give tangible and visible shape to his love and to the future of the Christian community. Shortly after taking his seat at the table, Jesus said, ***"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."***^{viii} In their last few hours together, Jesus wanted to impress on the hearts of the first disciple the idea of a faith community defined by service and love. While the disciples were still probably trying to figure out how this new commandment would play out in their lives, Jesus said the most astonishing thing they

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had ever heard coming out of his mouth: ***“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”***

I have to confess that I have always been a tad uncomfortable with this idea of being a friend of Jesus. In her newly published book *“Freeing Jesus,”* Christian author Diana Butler Bass claims, ***“The story of the New Testament is that the risk of friendship is the risk that frees us from fear and reshapes our lives—it is better to go together than to go alone. Jesus befriends us, opening our hearts to genuine love and the capacity to forgive each other, welcome all, and act justly in the world.”***^{ix} Diana believes that by calling us friends, Jesus gave Christians a new way to think about God. God is not a fearsome judge or master but a friend. At the table of the last supper, Jesus turned God into a friend who always acts lovingly and beckons us to reach back. ***“Once we were created by that hand that reached to dust and rib,”*** Diane wrote in her new book, ***“now that same hand joins ours again and again, the clasp of the unfailing friend.”***^x

I love this theological assertion that, ***“Jesus brought [the disciples] to the very heart of God and then revealed that God’s heart longed for friendship,”***^{xi} but I am always a bit nervous about the implications of this friendship for my life. In the Gospel of John, Jesus was quite clear about what he expected his friends to do – to love one another as he loved them. But Jesus was not satisfied with an abstract idea of love, he described the nature of his love to the disciples. ***“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”***

When I think about my friends, I must say that the thought of sacrificing my life for them is not the first thing that pops into my head. I love my friends, don’t get me wrong, but it never crosses my mind that I would ever be asked to lay down my life for any of them. I like to have them over for dinner or go on vacation with them, but I never ever think about giving my life away for any of them. And yet, Jesus told his first disciples that love for one’s friends entails the willingness to put your own life in the line for them. Friendship with Jesus carries a price! Jesus extended his friendship to his disciples and died on the cross for them, putting his own body between his friends and the brutality, injustice and brokenness of the world and, to be honest, we have no reason to assume that we might not be asked to do the same.

In the original Greek of John’s Gospel, the notion of friendship is firmly grounded in this powerful Christian idea of love. When Jesus called the disciples friends, he was saying that each one of them was very dear to his heart. They were not just special acquaintances or people he liked. They were beloved friends. And, dear church, this love is where the theological rubber meets the road of reality, where our faith meets the world! We may never be in a position, like so many Ukrainians find themselves this morning, where we may have to consider the real possibility of giving our lives away for the sake of our loved ones, those who are dearest to our hearts, our friends, but Jesus will not let us forget the uncomfortable new commandment he gave us at the Last Supper. Jesus will not allow us to ignore that as his friends, we do have a duty to love

much like he loved us. Jesus will not permit any one of us to love only ideas about him. To journey with Jesus as a friend, we have to be ready to put our lives in the line and act a lot more like Jesus.

My own discomfort with this idea of having Jesus as my friend comes from a rather selfish place in my heart. I do love Jesus but, to be frank with you, he can be a very annoying friend. He has expectations that I am never sure I can live up to. His teachings are splendidly simple and profoundly difficult at the same time. In the Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that he did not come to be worshipped, adored or served, but to serve and Jesus makes it as clear as day that there is only one type of life he thinks is worth living – the life of courageous, intentional, and sacrificial love for his friends. True greatness for Jesus is found only in a life lived for others. For any of his close friends who assume that Jesus came to make them feel good or saved, Jesus is categorical: to live the very best possible life you can live, you cannot save it! You have to give it away and lay your life down for those God loves and calls friends. You have to live as an apprentice instead of a master, as a guest instead of a host, as someone who is willing to kneel down rather than somebody who always wants to stand tall, as a person who is ready to look up instead of someone who always prefers to look down, as a disciple willing to love and serve especially those we would never see as our friends instead of a church member who doesn't give much thought to the way you may be mishandling the powerful ideas of friendship and love that Jesus handed on to church and may very well be turning Jesus' teachings into a poisonous bite.

“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 took a big gamble when he chose people like you and me to be his friends. He knew that we might get lost in the fog of words, in the letters of sacred texts, in our interpretations of his teachings and end up doing the very opposite of what he intended. Still, Jesus the Messiah, our annoying Friend, hopes that his followers that make up his Church today will sound and behave more like him. Jesus still hopes that we will extend our friendship to those who are not in our pews and will put our lives in the line to show the world a better way to love and live together. This is what people outside the church are hoping we will do, namely, to dare living as friends of Christ.

Commenting on the results of the Jesus-in-America survey, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church Rev. Michael Curry recognized that the behavior of many of Jesus' followers is a problem for the Church in America and he challenged Christians across denominational lines to ignite a revival of love that encourages all Americans to do a better job at loving their neighbors.^{xii} Bishop Curry's challenge to you and me and to our church made me think of Irenaeus of Lyons, one of the Early Church Fathers.

Irenaeus said that when Christians misinterpret or misunderstand the teachings of Christ, it is as though we were taking out the jewels of a beautifully and artfully constructed mosaic that created the portrait of a king to rearrange them into the shape

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of something as silly as a fox. All the precious jewels are still the same, but they no longer show the glorious and beautiful image the artist had in mind.

The hope that I hold in my heart and in my prayers for the Church in America and for our congregation is that we will be committed to model our behavior on the true essence of Jesus' teachings. I hope that we will continue to journey with our annoying Friend Jesus through Lent and hold on to the beautiful mosaic of our faith that shows that Christ is present with us, still inviting, still nudging, still impelling, still expecting us to handle his teachings with great care and love each other as beloved friends.

May the whole church say: Living Christ, help us to be Christians in our hearts!
Amen.

ⁱ Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Catch a Snake in Arittha Sutra, MA 220 & Alagaddupama Sutta, MN 22.

ⁱⁱ Jesus in America, survey conducted by Ipsos for the Episcopal Church, March 2022 [<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/jesus-in-america/>].

ⁱⁱⁱ By Ipsos in Episcopal Church Jesus in America Public Poll, Faith and Religion/Society, 10 March 2022 [<https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/episcopal-church-jesus-america-public-poll>].

^{iv} Quotes of Famous People [<https://quotepark.com/quotes/1937813-mahatma-gandhi-i-like-your-christ-i-do-not-like-your-christians/>].

^v Anne Lamott in Plan B, Further Thoughts on Faith, p. 22 [adapted]. See also The Other Jesus, by Greg Garrett, p. 82.

^{vi} Amy-Jill Levine in The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus, pp. 7, 51-52, 217.

^{vii} John 13:4 [English Standard Version].

^{viii} John 13:34-35.

^{ix} Diana Butler Bass in Freeing Jesus, p. 18, Kindle Edition.

^x *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 15.

^{xii} The Office of Public Affairs in New poll confirms Jesus remains important spiritual figure, but pandemic had effect on religious activity, Episcopal Church, 09 March 2022 [<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/new-poll-confirms-jesus-remains-important-spiritual-figure-but-pandemic-had-effect-on-religious-activity/>].