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“A New Commandment”  
Psalm 98    John 15: 9-17    I John 5:1-6

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 15:9-17

The word “love” may be the most overused word in the English language. Love has been given many definitions. In the Baytown Little Theater Production of “Forever Plaid” they sang the song, “Love Is A Many Splendored Thing.” Barbara Streisand sang, “Love soft as an easy chair,” which sadly I was once asked to sing at a wedding. We say that we love a lot of things. We might love what we ate at the restaurant. When it comes to obeying Jesus commandment to love one another what does that take? Let’s listen to the word of God from John 15:9-17.

Let’s pray. Dear Lord, thank you for these words of promise. Thank you for the call to friendship with you. As we ponder what that call means for us as individuals and as a part of your church may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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The humorist Will Rogers once said, “I never met a man I didn’t like.” In the musical that celebrated Rogers' life, there is a song by that title and in that song Rogers admits that there was one man who "put him to the test," but never pushed him finally to the point where his ability to like evaporated.

Come now, can any of us stand and say that we have, without exception, always liked every single person with whom we have ever come into contact? We are not called to like everyone, but we are called, to love: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you," says Jesus.

John Ortberg in his book, Everybody’s Normal Till You Get to Know Them, cites one of the most thorough research projects on relationships-the Alameda County Study. Headed by a Harvard social scientist, it tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. Researchers found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections.

People who had bad health habits (such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use) but strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words, it is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone. Harvard researcher Robert Putnam notes that if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, “you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.”

For another study, as reported in the Journal of the American Medical

Association, 276 volunteers were infected with a virus that produces the common cold. The study found that people with strong emotional connections did four times better fighting off illness than those who were more isolated. These people were less susceptible to colds, had less viruses, and produced significantly less mucous than relationally isolated subjects. (I'm not making this up. They produced less mucous. This means it is literally true: Unfriendly people are snottier than friendly people.)<sup>1</sup>

On Thursday, 20 people gathered in the courtyard between Baytown's City Hall and Community Center for the National Day of Prayer. Eight of us were pictured on the front page of the Baytown Sun on Friday's paper. We may not be able to fight City Hall, but we can pray outside it.

This year's theme for the National Day of Prayer was Unity. At the beginning of the service I asked, "How many of you here are from different churches?" Almost every hand went up among scattered laughter. I said, we may worship in different church buildings, but we are part of the one church of Jesus Christ.

At the end of the service I asked those gathered to share the name of the church they regularly attend. Of the 20 gathered 19 different churches were represented. One person didn't have a church home at the moment. Six of the eight us who made the front page of the Baytown Sun are pastors, but because of Jesus, all of us gathered were friends. They were friends we just hadn't met yet.

Jesus said there is no greater love than this--to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus demonstrated His love by His selfless sacrifice for our sin on the cross that we might come to eternal life. This type of sacrificial self-giving love is expected of Jesus' disciples as well. This means us too.

One summer morning as Ray Blankenship was preparing his breakfast, he gazed out the window, and saw a small girl being swept along in the rain-flooded drainage ditch beside his Andover, Ohio, home.

Blankenship knew that farther downstream, the ditch disappeared with a roar underneath a road and then emptied into the main culvert. Ray dashed out the door and raced along the ditch, trying to get ahead of the floundering child. Then he hurled himself into the deep, churning water. Blankenship surfaced and was able to grab the child's arm. They tumbled end over end. Within about three feet of the yawning culvert, Ray's free hand felt something--possibly a rock--protruding from one bank. He clung desperately, but the tremendous force of the water tried to tear him and the child away. "If I can just hang on until help comes," he thought. He did better than that. By the time fire-department rescuers arrived, Blankenship had pulled the girl to safety. Both were treated for shock.

On April 12, 1989, Ray Blankenship was awarded the Coast Guard's Silver Lifesaving Medal. The award is fitting, for this selfless person was at even greater risk to himself than most people knew. Ray Blankenship had never learned to swim. 2

Jesus says to his disciples that they have been raised from servants to friends. A servant serves out of cringing fear, but a friend does not fear. Part of willing and loving obedience depends upon knowing why one does what he or she does. But there is still demand expected of friendship.

Garth Brooks' breakout song was "I've got Friends in Low places." But friends, as those who have been called to follow Jesus we have in him a friend in the highest place of all. Jesus has called us friends. And he did that long before Facebook. We know that we are much more than his servants through this FAITHBOOK (Hold up Bible) He has called us friends.

Kairos prison ministry has a motto that I love. "Make a friend. Be a Friend. Bring a friend to Christ. You and I are not only Friends of Jesus we are called to make friends, to be friends and bring friends to Christ so they can become HIS friends.

We are called to do this even when it is unpopular; when it is inconvenient when it is uncomfortable, when it is someone who isn't like us and when it is even someone WE may Dislike. There are people that need to be forgiven and to know the forgiveness of a friend. There are people in our neighborhoods, in our schools at our work, in this church who need a friend. I need a friend. I need more than having 1,829 Facebook Friends. *I need face to face friends.*

There are people who need to know that they are loved and are ready to bloom just waiting for someone to reach out to them. There are even bullies who need to know that they are loved both by Jesus, and by us. They need to know they can find a friend in us AND in Jesus.

Joseph Scriven was born near Banbridge, in the heart of the rolling hills of County Down, Northern Ireland. After graduating from Dublin's famous 'Trinity College' he seemed set for a brilliant career and a happy life for he was also engaged to be married. But then tragedy struck! His fiancée' was accidentally drowned on the very eve of their wedding and Joseph was plunged into his first great experience of sorrow. In the providence of God it was this tragedy which brought him to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ.

In 1845 he sailed for Canada to start life anew and, hopefully, to leave all his sorrows behind. But it was not to be, for ill-health dogged him and he was forced to return to Ireland after only two months. Two years later he again set sail for Canada to take up a teaching post. In this he was successful and later graduated to the position of private tutor to the children of a military captain. Life, at last, seemed worth living and prospects were continually improving!

Again he met and fell in love; this time with a charming young woman of twenty-three. Soon they were engaged to be married. However, bitter disappointment was once more to be his unhappy lot, for this young lady was suddenly stricken with a serious illness and died before their marriage vows could be solemnized. Cheated for the second time out of the prospects of a happy marriage by the cruel hand of death, Joseph quite naturally became the victim of severe depression and declining health. But despite all this, he never gave up his personal faith in the Savior.

By this time he had settled in Port Hope, Ontario, and was manager of a small dairy there. He became known as the local 'Good Samaritan', helping the poor and under-privileged, sharing his food with the needy and often giving them clothing. However, all these good deeds may well have been forgotten if he had not written twenty-four lines of poetry to comfort his mother who was suffering from a serious illness. Through his trials and afflictions Joseph came to know the Lord in a very personal way, not only as Savior but also as a Friend.

Joseph had not seen his mother since he had said 'goodbye' over ten years before and wasn't able to make the long journey back home to be with her. So he wrote a poem and sent it with the prayer that it would remind her of 'the never failing friend', Jesus Christ. He never intended his poem to be published, but a friend who visited him during his last illness discovered the lines and asked "Who wrote these beautiful words?" Joseph's modest reply was, "The Lord and I did it between us." Soon it was published in The Port Hope Guide, a local newspaper.

Remarkably, a copy of that newspaper was used to wrap a parcel destined for an address in New York City. When the recipient unwrapped his parcel he caught sight of Joseph's poem and arranged to have it published. Eventually, it was seen by German-American composer, Charles Converse, and very soon his simple, plaintive melody gave wings of song Joseph's telling words. Thus an Irish-Canadian and a German-American were used of God to bring blessing and encouragement to millions through the beloved hymn What A Friend We Have In Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

What a friend we have in Jesus! We've got friends, in low places and high places and everywhere in between. We've got friends in this room. We don't have to see our God as way off in the sky on a cloud demanding that we do good work for him so we can earn or deserve God's friendship. Instead, we can be close, intimate friends of his who can go right into his presence without fear.

Jesus came to give us the kind of love that would move us to outdo Will Rogers...to be able to say much more than "I never met a man I didn't like." Through the power of the Holy Spirit can love those we may not particularly like and obey Jesus New commandment to work to love people we haven't met yet.

That's what it takes to be what Jesus called us to be-friends of his who make friends of others by obeying his ... New Commandment.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for making friends with us. Thank you that you have reached out to us and that through the power of your Spirit we can reach out to others in your name. Thank you for the friends that you have gathered into this fellowship here at Faith. Thank you for the friends we will make as we leave this place of worship. Thank you for the friends that are waiting to be made.

We thank you for the opportunity to pray for our Nation like we were able to do this past Thursday. We thank you that we live in a nation where we are free to gather to do so. We pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are not able to do so in their countries, for those who are persecuted and even killed for their faith in Jesus.

We pray for JR Danforth, one of four missionaries who are missing because their boat capsized in Tanzania yesterday. We pray for those who are laying down their lives for us as they serve as police and firefighters and first responders, for those who serve in the military, for those in public service, and for those in this worship services who take their call to be friends of Jesus and to befriend others in his name seriously.

We pray for those who are in need of your healing power, especially Melba Spears as she undergoes her second round of chemotherapy.

May our love for others grow. Love does indeed work wonders. Work now in us so that other my experience your love through us. These things we pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, our brother THE Friend we have in Jesus.

1 [Ortberg, John (2008-04-01). Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them (p. 33). Zondervan. Kindle Edition

2(Paul Harvey, Los Angeles Times Syndicate. From a sermon by Arsenio B. Segismundo, Unto the End of Life, 7/28/2010)

3 .SOURCE: Great Hymn Stories, by James McClelland, paperback, 160 pages, ISBN#: 0 907927 998