

“Befriended”
1 Kings 9:3-8; Romans 5:6-17;
John 15:8-19

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First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
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Last week, we talked about how through the love of God we are given the opportunity to think about and see how God might see us, and to recognize that there's this invitation – and Jesus says it this way this week – to make your joy complete. He's encouraging us to see ourselves a little differently, to see ourselves from his perspective not just how we generally might see ourselves. He sees in us the potential for the laughter and joy that we can know in him through grace. As we think about that, what I recognize is the invitation to be one who sees where he leads, that new life.

It says here we are called to be his friends. He's making us his friends. I want to think a little bit about what it's like to be friends. As we go through life, I imagine all of us have had a friend or two, and hopefully more than that. Perhaps you have also had the unfortunate experience of losing a friend. That could happen in several ways. One, we can have some disagreement with a friend that can break off the friendship, and we'll go our separate ways. Sometimes it's not quite as volatile as that. It seems like over time we just lose touch. We seem to have different interests, we drift apart, and we may not even know where someone who was a friend is today. It is this idea of being in relationship as friend, having something in common that is central to what I want to think about today.

In the old testament, when God interacts with God's people as the passage today describes, he invites them to worship, to be part of a relationship with him in which they remember who he is, how he deserves to be honored, to have accolades, that he is indeed someone really special. He's God. He invited them to come and participate in that and to make that central to who they are together. And if they don't, then it's going to fall apart as it goes on to say in that passage.

So there's this invitation to come and be part of what God is doing, to recognize who God is. I want to think about that in relationship to him inviting us to be on a team. This is the time of year when a number of people think about a particular kind of team. It has something to do with a ball like this (a football). After yesterday's UI-WSU game, I am feeling a little blue when I think of football; that's why I wore a blue shirt today. But as we think about being on a team, it is an invitation to do something in particular. That is what God is inviting us to do, to do something particular, to be on his team.

As we think about that invitation, we can do several things with it. We can say, “Well, that's interesting,” and leave it at that. We can say, “I don't know how to play that particular game, so I don't want to try.” Or we can say, “I'm not going out on the field with *those* guys!” There are a variety of reactions we might have to being invited to being on that team.

What does it mean to be invited to be on God's team? I don't know about you, but early in my life I would say that I haven't always accepted that invitation, and generally what I find out when I don't accept the invitation is that I then see all these guys playing and wish I were there. Basically, that's what God has done. He's invited us to participate in a new

life, a life that he would give us and to be with us and to allow us to worship and all this wonderful stuff, and I often go off in the other direction. It's called sin. Missing out. Somehow breaking that relationship. Drifting apart, or just saying no, or getting in an argument. But what I have found is that when I do that there are those who have said yes, and I wish I were there.

That's what Paul is talking about. We have one who has come and re-invited us, in a way. That's what Jesus does. He invites us again to participate with the team, to be God's people, to recognize that we are children of God and that we can be part of what God is doing. Now, we recognize oftentimes that he's opened the door through his sacrifice, through the giving of his life. In a way, he takes on all the stuff that we have gone off to do that wasn't helpful and said, "Here, let me take that so that you can see yourself anew." We thought about that last week, too. We thought about how he can help us see ourselves anew. He can do that by taking all that junk with him to the grave and then coming back to be with us. That's what Paul is talking about. It's a reconciliation. How wonderful it is when we have a reconciliation with a friend. We get to play again. We get to be reconciled and to know that love again.

Jesus invites us to be his friends. First of all, it's always a little hard for me to think about what it means to be a friend with God, even with Jesus. He's suggesting what it means is "I'm going to let you know what's going on." That's what scripture does; it lets us know what's going on. It's this idea that there are two sides to reconciliation, so we're involved together. But there are also some common interests, so it's like being on a team. What Jesus is talking about is as we hear his invitation and participate in the game, we are no longer servants because we know what's happening. We know why. We know the rules of the game.

Sometimes when we enter into a friendship we wonder how it's going to go. We are somewhere new and we are trying to figure out what are the rules of this game. Some of us grew up in households that had particular rules and we knew the rules of our household. We went to somebody else's house and we didn't quite know the rules. In some ways, what Jesus says is, "I'm going to be real clear about what the rules of this game are so we can do this together. If you follow my commandment, you are my friends."

Let me describe this a little bit because I think you have to be a little bit clear about what we hold in common. Think about this as the rules—if we don't follow them, it's hard to play the game. For example, if I want to play with this football and decided I was going to dribble, it doesn't work the way I expected and the people on my team might not like it if I kept dropping the ball. Or if I tried to play baseball with it and kept trying to throw it back home, especially if I thought home was my home goal, we wouldn't like it. We can't play football unless we play football. We can't be on Jesus' team if we're not willing to play life together.

Jesus wants to be clear about what he's suggesting it is. I didn't actually count, but how many times was the word "love" here? Jesus says, "This commandment I give you, love one another." It feels like there's one rule for this game: allow God to love us and to love one another. "Love one another even as I have loved you," he says. If there's a moral imperative, maybe that's it: to love one another.

Now, I'm tempted to stop right there, because that's it, really. We're supposed to love one another. That's what Jesus asks us to do to get in the game, to be his friends, to allow him to walk with us and to be the one we follow. The only thing that's a little complicated there is that we have to think about what it means to love one another and so I don't want to leave it without talking just a little bit about what it means to love one another.

When he's talking about friends here, he's using a word that is one of the words for love: "phileo." It's the idea that you create this loyalty, or you create a group. But when Jesus talks about love, the love that is generally throughout the New Testament, it is "agape." That word "agape" is not used much in the Greek society, but it is almost always used in the New Testament. I think it's the key to understanding what Jesus is asking of us because it's a word that has a sense of choice to it. It's not just that we fall in love. This is not a love that we fall into, it's a love that we choose to do. So he's inviting us to make a choice, to choose to care for one another, to care because we are cared for. God first loved us. God made that choice to care for us. We are loved. The last piece of the meaning of that word is *to value*. We are valued. And so we are invited to choose to care for those around us because we recognize their value as children of God. That feels like the rule of the game that Jesus is giving us. We continually make that choice when we allow ourselves to be his friends, go with him through this journey of life, play the game together.

There's an incredible little piece at the end of that Romans passage. Paul says we will rule life. I think what that's getting at is that when we begin to really allow that to be who we are – that the rule becomes our life, you might say – what happens is that life is no longer in control of us because what's in control of us is our relationship to Christ and the love that he has given us. It's the way people have gotten through tremendous hardships by recognizing a moment of beauty where they remember God's presence. They remember his gift of love, even in some of the hardest circumstances. You can hear stories of people who are in concentration camps who through that recognition were able to make it through.

So as we are invited to get on the team and play the game with Christ, to love one another, we find that life becomes a place that doesn't rule us, but in which we begin to allow that joy of Christ to rise and for Christ's joy to be made complete. So let's play the game! Amen.

Lord, as we think about our lives and the particular struggles that we might have – the ways we struggle with how you call us, who we should be, the moments when we really want to dribble instead of play the game you call us to – help us let go of those things and to see where we can go as you see where we can go, to see the wonder of life that you are offering and the joy that will continue to seep in and bubble up. Lord, lead us into that life. Let us play the game of love, the rule you've given us. Let us be your friends and go with you and know that wonder and recognize that when we are with you and follow you, that's all the identity we need. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.