

“Bearing Fruit”  
Acts 10:34-43; Romans 7:4-6;  
John 15:8-17

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Last week, I started out asking, “What’s your name?” Then I went on to suggest that as we recognize Jesus and abide with him there are ways in which he renames us. He renames us “forgiven.” He renames us “children of God.” He renames us as “disciples.”

I wonder if you were able to think about any of those ways that we’ve been renamed and how that influences you or how you might have lived into those this week. I’m not going to ask for hands and hear testimonies, but I would like you to think about how being renamed changes the way we think about ourselves.

There is a way in which we might also think about how we name Jesus. Not only do we take on names and ways of being, but we can think about names we use for Jesus—Messiah, Christ, Savior, Son of God, Judge (as in the Romans passage today). As we think about all these ways we name Jesus, I notice in all these names I just mentioned, they are such high names. They feel like they create a distance between myself and Jesus. He’s so much greater—Savior, King. When I think of a king, I think of someone far away and way up high.

And yet, there’s a way in which, in this passage, Jesus is going to change his name for us. As he’s talking to his disciples, he says, “I no longer consider you servants.” This is no longer a servant-master relationship. He says, “I am not holding on to information so I can lord it over you. No, I’m sharing all that I have with you. What the Father is sharing with me, I am sharing with you.” So one of the names we get for Jesus is Teacher. But he goes on to say it’s not a servant-master, or even teacher-disciple relationship in that hierarchical way. He says, “I call you friends.” And in calling his disciples “friends,” he is calling himself a friend. He is a friend. It’s hard for me sometimes to reconcile calling him Friend with also calling him King. Or maybe what he’s doing is redefining “King” in a way that’s pretty spectacular: Friend.

When we think about who our friends are, or what the friend relationship is, we generally think about friendship as having some sort of reciprocity in it. It goes back and forth. Sometimes when I think about Jesus, I think about it in only one direction. I need to give him the honor and the glory and to pay attention to who he is, but he doesn’t really need to pay attention to who I am. And yet that’s what he’s saying in some ways here is that in being friend, in God coming incarnate to us, there’s the suggestion that God is paying attention to who we are.

In fact, when we think about who we make friends with, it’s usually people we spend time with, but then we also make friends most quickly with those who get our jokes, or can understand our dreams or frustrations. The people we most quickly associate with are the ones with whom we have that commonality. When Jesus is calling his disciples

“friends,” he’s saying, “I get you,” in some ways, and inviting us to recognize that we can “get” him. We can get that love of God that he is bringing. So as we begin to think about him inviting us into that friend relationship, that reciprocity, we have that sense of understanding each other—knowing that he gets us and that we begin to get him.

It’s interesting to think about what happens with friendships because sometimes it’s said that who you are is indicative of who your friends are. We get shaped by our friendships. We talked about how this works with Jesus in the idea of abiding. We talked about how when we live somewhere, pathways start to form. When you live with Jesus, pathways start to form. He’s the master of life, and just as we would go to a Master Gardener to learn about gardening, he’s somebody we would listen to. So it is with our friendships. Our friendships help form and shape us. Something comes out of them.

I went to a talk this week where a professor was suggesting that when we believe something or think something, that belief or that thought can be deepened just by meeting somebody else who believes the same thing. In some ways this is a good thing. If we’re gardeners and we meet somebody else who’s gardening, it reinforces that and we can begin to form a relationship around gardening. Or if I were a quilter or a basketball player or any number of other things, I could form relationship with others who have the same interest. In some ways that’s a great thing because we move into those relationships around a similar thing we appreciate.

I think there’s also a shadow side to this, and that is that we can begin to think something, and we hear somebody else thinks similar to what we do, so we can go off in that direction. If it’s simply an opinion that we begin to shape together, the problem is that in this world there’s something we call reality. We have to deal with reality, yet we can easily try to deny reality. I think some famous singer recently came out and said he was a flat-earther. You know, I can believe that the earth is flat and I can find other people who believe the earth is flat. That doesn’t mean I am dealing in reality. How do we shape our reality? How do we recognize reality? And how do I not just find a group of people who have similar views as my own and think I’ve found reality? These days it’s so easy to just find that group and stay inside that group and never hear another way of thinking. So I could be a flat-earther. I could be all kinds of things.

When Jesus invites us to be his friends, he’s inviting us into kind of an interest group. I think it’s an interest group that is interested in reality, and that he wants to help us see what is central to that reality. He wants us to join together into a community that is about that reality. There are a couple of ways to define what he is talking about. I think it was in the Acts passage where it says, “Now I understand God shows no partiality, but anywhere where God is feared and you work righteousness.” I’m not talking about your works righteousness. What is being said there is where there is energy (the word “work” is energy) you develop that working righteousness.

So there are two pieces to that. The recognition, the wonder about who God is, that incredible awe, the sense that God is incredible and needs to be paid attention to, and

that we're working righteousness—we are giving our energy to right relationships. That's what righteousness means.

Now I think Jesus is saying the same thing in a different way. He's saying, "I give you a new commandment." I always struggle a little bit with the word "commandment" but if you think about it in this way, what he's saying is, "I give you a purpose. If you work out my purpose, if you deal with this purpose I'm describing for you, you're my friends because that's what we're about." And what does he say that purpose is? To love one another as I have loved you. It's that idea of choosing to care for the other.

How does that fit with the idea of that danger we have of just going off into our own little areas and groups? Well, when we allow him to make that love of each other our purpose, to recognize his love and the love of each other as core, one of the things about that core is to say you can't just love the people you're with. You've got to pay attention to the people around you. You've got to pay attention to others because that's what God's love is. It's about paying attention, not only to the people we're closest to, but to everyone. In fact, Jesus says in Matthew that we don't even count it important if a friend dies for a friend, but when someone dies for someone who is not...

He's pointing us outward. He's saying we can't just stay right here with our group. We've got to pay attention to the world around us. We've got to care about each other. I'm thankful we have each other, and that he calls us into this wonderful group that supports and cares for each other, but it's not so that we not pay attention to the world and the struggles and the troubles that we've got. In fact, it feels to me like he says we have to deal with them more than people who aren't aware of Christ. If we're going to follow Christ, we have to pay attention to the world we live in and care about it. We have to live in the world and care about the people around us.

I think that what he's giving us is a great wisdom that is much deeper than my selfishness or my wanting to just insulate myself, because when we live in the world everything becomes better. It's when we listen to each other and pay attention and care for one another that the world becomes a better place. In fact, in the Romans passage it says when we're in our sinful nature our fruits are death, and what our fruits are when we pay attention to what Jesus is telling us are fruits to God and life that comes.

He's asking us to bear fruit—to recognize the purpose he gives us, the commandment he give us, and that is to love one another. He says it multiple times in this passage and he says it in other places. So if we think about what the core of our faith is, it's about the awe and the wonder, the reverence, the fear we have of God and the working of righteousness in our lives—that is, the right relationships, the choice to care for each other, to love one another—and we will bear fruits to God rather than fruit to death.

It's not an easy thing for me to think about carrying out because sometimes it means I listen to people I don't agree with. It's not just about who's right. Part of it is about whether we can care for each other. It is as we learn to care for each other we can care beyond each other. God cares about our world and us. He invites us to also care, to

love one another, to allow his love to give us the confidence to love one another—that is to pay attention, to reach out, to include even those we don't agree with. Jesus suggests that when we do this we enter his joy and his joy will be complete. This passage ends again with "love one another."

We've been given a purpose. Sometimes it feels in life that we struggle to find purpose. Sometimes it feels a little Pollyanna to say that the purpose we have in life is to love one another, yet think about how hard that really is. Could we do it at all without the love of God and the work of the Spirit? Amen.