

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
May 9, 2021 Streaming Mass
Easter 6th Sunday of Year B John 15:9-17

Friendship is one of the greatest blessings of human existence. It is available to every human being. One may never find the love of one's life, but the path of friendship is available to us all. It doesn't matter if one's friends be many, or just a trusted few; friendship is the most basic, the most natural of all human relationships. In friendship, each shares with the other a part of who they are. That is what can make each of them a better person. There is an acceptance of each other just as they are, without trying to remake them or reshape them into different kinds of people, and without trying to use or exploit that person for one's own ends. Another mark of friendship is that friends share something in common. Aristotle describes the bond of friendship as being like "one soul inhabiting two bodies." There is a likeness, a similarity, a reciprocity, an equality between friends. Friends enjoy doing something together. They share each other's hopes, dreams and aspirations. They often want the same things out of life. So, it seems strange that Jesus should say to His disciples, "I call you friends," because they, and we for that matter, have so little in common with Him who is the Son of God, to Whom we are in no way equal. Still, it is this bond of friendship that is supposed to be the starting point for our growing in relationship with Him.

We hear Jesus say, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." We may get the impression that Jesus is saying to His disciples, "Because I have laid down my life for you who are my friends, now you owe me. Start doing for each other the kind of thing I did for you." That is not what Jesus is saying. That would be a kind of emotional blackmail. Jesus is giving His life precisely for those who are not His friends—those who will bring about His execution and those who will abandon Him, all the while proclaiming to be His friends. It is clear that those who plotted to take Jesus' life were not His friends, but not so clear in regard to His disciples. Early on in the Gospels we see that the disciples are not "in sync" with Jesus. When Jesus tells them that He will be handed over and executed, Peter says, and we can presume he is speaking for the rest, "God forbid, that that should happen to You." To which Jesus responds, "Get behind me Satan." Peter shows that he and the others are not true friends of Jesus because they do not share Jesus' vision of what His life, what His ministry is all about. At best they are erstwhile friends, fair-weather friends. A word that has come into use in the past few years is "frenemies," a combination of "friend" and "enemy." That's what Peter appears to be in this context—a "frenemy" of Jesus. A "frenemy" is one

who appears to support their friend, but actually is sabotaging that relationship. Peter is telling Jesus to take a path different than the one appointed for Him, and in doing that is undermining Jesus' mission.

Jesus dies for those who are not His friends so that they, so that we, might become His true friends, to possess together with Him that which is most distinctive about His life. Jesus is offering His disciples the possibility of being much more than they ever were before. They will be empowered by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to give of themselves, just as Jesus gave of Himself. That is how they will become His equals, His true friends. Each one of His disciples, which is each one of us, is being offered a relationship with Him that is not to be characterized by fear or guilt, nor by blind obedience. Rather, we are to bring the uniqueness of who we are, and allow His Holy Spirit to abide in us, allowing ourselves to be transformed by His presence living in our hearts, just as true friends can become better people, can ennoble each other, can come to share each other's best qualities in that bond of friendship. What Jesus is offering is not so much a command as it is an invitation, an opportunity.

Jesus says, "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends because I have told you everything I have heard from the Father." Slaves are simply given their marching orders. It doesn't matter to the master if they know the reason why. All that matters is that they get the job done. Morals are sometimes taught that way. Just do it, because I told you so! Don't ask any questions! (We might ask ourselves if that is the way we have been taught, and do we still live out our faith based on that way of teaching.) Friends, on other hand, can be trusted to get things right. Because they share a common vision of life, they can be trusted to figure things out for themselves, to take the initiative, to use their imagination, their talents, their experience to address the challenge at hand. St. Paul says, "Put on the mind of Christ," i.e., start thinking as does Jesus, have the same hopes and desires as does the risen Jesus, begin to want for other people what God wants for them, viz. that they flourish as human beings. Desire to treat them as you would want yourself to be treated.

Friendships need to be tended; like anything that is alive, they need to be nourished. In Holy Communion we have the opportunity to have that friendship with Jesus nourished and strengthened, when the risen Jesus comes to us and we come to Him. In the meanwhile let us give thanks for the friends that we do have. May the best of those friendships inspire us to live in the manner of Jesus, by being willing to extend ourselves even to strangers; to treat everyone with the mark of friendship—with honesty, with respect and with a genuine concern for their well-being. Then we will be the true friends of Jesus that He invites us to be.