

Reflection on John 15:9–17
Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

The Gospel of John devotes four chapters, including the portion we just heard, to Jesus' parting words to his disciples. Beginning with Jesus washing the disciples' feet in chapter 13 through to Jesus' beautiful high priestly prayer in chapter 17, the words and gestures expressed are warm and intimate leaving us in no doubt of the great love that surrounds us.

The nature of this love is conveyed most fully, I think, when Jesus says, "I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you *friends*." A most remarkable proclamation and, in many ways, as revolutionary as Julia Ward Howe's vision for Mother's Day. The shift from servanthood imagery to friendship has the potential to reframe our relationship with God and with one another in a world riven by domination, gaps that seem to have no way or will to be closed, and "-isms" of every kind.

Now, it may seem odd that the idea of service appears to get a bad rap in this reading. After all, isn't serving others at the heart of what it means to follow Christ? Isn't service our reason for being? our mission?

As valuable—and valued by others—as our assistance might be, it may not always promote the vision of love and community cast for us by Jesus in John's Gospel, especially his calling to friendship. If service becomes our *primary* identity and helping others is the source of meaning and purpose for us, we run the risk of orchestrating our relationships in ways that maintain the haves and have nots, where dependencies are unintentionally reinforced.

For example, this week a member of our community started a new job. Yelena and her husband Rufford have been unemployed since we met them when the pandemic began in 2020. It has been a joy to befriend, support and eventually work alongside Yelena throughout these months. She has moved from waiting at our tables for emergency relief to waiting on tables as a volunteer and so much more. I confess I felt a wave of disappointment when I heard about Yelena's re-employment. Her absence during the week will impact—it will change things around here and *I will miss her!*

If our relationships are defined by service—that is, what we can *give or do for the other*—the shift that has happened between Yelena and our community over these months would be insurmountable. Because as servants, by definition, we *need* others to remain needy or even in an infantile state in order for us to have purpose and value. Who are we if we are not the giver? the helper in this equation?

In contrast, Jesus says, “As the father has loved me, so I have loved you... Love one another as—or *in the way that*—I have loved you.” The *kind of love* we are invited to embody reflects the love found in God as Father, Son and Spirit. The love between persons of the Trinity is *mutual, interrelated, and life bearing*. One person of the Trinity is not greater than or dependent on another. In fact, through the love of their interrelationship, creation is born and sustained.

Obviously, our relationships will never reach the ideal of the Triune God in this lifetime! But as the Gospel encourages, this mutual, interrelated, fruit bearing love is both the Source and hope of Christian community. In her commentary on the Gospel of John, Sandra Schneider’s writes:

Friendship is the one human relationship based on equality. If it does not begin between equals it quickly abolishes whatever inequality it discovers or renders the inequality irrelevant within the structure of the relationship. In perfect friendship, which is indeed rare, the good of each is truly the other’s good and so, in seeking the good of the friend, one’s own good is achieved. But this self-fulfilment involves no subversive seeking of self; it is simply the by-product of the friend’s happiness. This is why service rendered between friends is never exacted and creates no debts, demands no return but evokes reciprocity, and never degenerates into covert exploitation. ...Service between friends, in other words, realizes the pure ideal [as seen in Jesus washing the disciples’ feet].

Jesus’ image of friendship, then, promises a more wholistic, unifying and ennobling call for Christian community, one with the potential to heal the wounds of dominance, hierarchy and dependencies. So, as a community of friends, we watch with delight as Yelena moves from receiving from us, to working alongside us, to taking flight in our midst and any sense of loss we might have is quelled by our sharing in her joy.

This example may seem a bit obvious or overly simplistic perhaps. But hopefully it illustrates something of the nature of love within a community of friends. In friendship, there is giving *and receiving*, a sharing among equals and a common desire for one another’s well-being.

When one thrives or participates in new ways, we are not threatened by the change it may bring but make room and give thanks. We do not gain our sense of identity and meaning at the expense of another's weakness or need, but together seek to help one another grow up in all things into Christ, to become the people God created us to be.



The image of Jesus washing the disciples' feet by German painter Sieger Köder provides a visual parable for us of what this kind of love in Christian community requires of us. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus flips the ordinary relationship between teacher and disciple on its head. In taking the place of a slave, he equalises the relationship, relinquishing his power and lifting up the disciples with his tender touch.

This symbolic gesture makes real the affirmation we heard today: I no longer call you servants... but friends.

Notice the depiction of Peter's stance in this image. One hand draws Jesus in while the other seems to want to hold him at a distance.

While focusing on the hand pushing Jesus away:

- Where do you sense resistance to viewing yourself and another through the lens of friendship?
- In what relationship or with what type of person is it difficult to see the other in mutual, interconnected ways?

While focusing on the hand drawing Jesus in:

- When have you had an experience of friendship that surprised you? When have you received a grace from an unexpected person?
- In recalling this experience, what might it encourage in you for the future?

Can you see the reflection of Jesus' face in the bowl of water? What does Jesus' face convey to you as you consider the questions above?