

## WHAT A FRIEND

“People necessarily live in contact with other people, and with this contact comes responsibility for other people.” The man who wrote those words may not have been thinking of Jesus at the time, but he had a great passion for creating Christian community. Jesus had a great sense of responsibility for other people, truly the greatest responsibility the world has ever known.

In the gospel of John what stands out for me are the encounters with Christ at a very personal level. Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, the man who sat by a pool of water for 38 years hoping to be healed – all these were touched in some way by Jesus, yet there is no mention of whether they remained faithful to Him.

Then there were the friendships, most notably with Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and with the disciples of whom Peter, James and John seem the closest to Him. No, John did not fill his gospel with many examples of healing as the other gospels with Jesus constantly on the move. Those Jesus did heal or change received the benefit of His time as well.

Most of chapter 4 is devoted to His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Nearly all of chapter 11 features the developing story of Jesus hearing of the death of Lazarus and responding to the news. Jesus was present in body, mind and spirit. It wouldn't be hard to imagine Jesus sitting down with you for a chat or a theological discussion, although I don't think I would take on theology with Him!

Relationships matter to us because they matter to Jesus. He went to Samaria and struck up a conversation with a Samaritan woman by asking for a drink of water, a request that opened up a whole line of questions and answers that became something much more than she could have anticipated. This nameless woman with a troubled past learned much more about Jesus than she imagined. In truth, He disclosed to her His identity as the Messiah.

Whereas His disciples were questioned as to who they thought He was, this woman learned the truth because of her inquisitiveness, her way of challenging Him in conversation. And yet for all she learned of Him, she went away believing he had revealed to her the knowledge of, in her words, “everything I've ever done.”

Because He knew about her past, with her five marriages and a current man in her life who was not her husband, she clearly felt He had looked straight into her soul and discovered all the pain that lingered there. He spoke no more than what was true, but maybe for her it was a relief to not have to hide anymore.

He did not judge her past but invited her to consider her present life and her future with the gift of living water, the Spirit of God. We never get to hear the end of the discussion or her answer to the offer because they were interrupted by the disciples and that's when she left. She left without her jug of water. Without the one thing that sent her there in the first place.

She was so inspired about the possibility of the Messiah that she let go of her regrets to return home and tell others what this man saw in her. Her testimony became a way for them to learn about and meet Jesus, as all testimonies are meant to do.

There is another woman's story in the gospel of John, one you won't likely hear preached or even read in the rotation of Scriptures each year. It's thought to be an addition, but you've probably seen it portrayed in movies on the life of Jesus. An author called it "one of the most fascinating and beautiful in all the account of the ministry of our Lord." I agree.

It's a tale of morality but with a twist as Jesus taught religious leaders about God's judgment. Known to us only as "the woman caught in adultery," she was dragged before Jesus in the early hours of the morning, when such offenses were likely to be discovered. Flaunting their holiness before Him, the Pharisees issued Jesus a challenge, "The law commands us to stone such women. What do you say?"

Jesus could have done several things in response. He could have asked about the other person involved in the affair, the other guilty party. No mention is made of the man she was with, and yet the law clearly stated both parties were to be stoned for their crime. Jesus could have picked up the first stone and said, "Let's do it, boys. After all, a law is a law. Who am I to shake things up?" But that's not the Jesus we know.

Jesus did what He did best in His ministry. He didn't act as a judge, He acted as a teacher, as a savior. In a completely casual and dismissive manner, Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with His finger. When they kept on questioning Him, He straightened up and said to them, "*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*"

According to the law the one who was a witness to the crime was supposed to be the one to throw the first stone. No one in that group took credit for being the sole witness, and certainly no one there was without sin. You see, this passage is not merely about the fact that no one present in that crowd was able to cast the first stone because none of them were without sin.

It's not just meant to remind us that we are steeped in sin ourselves and so we cannot judge others. When Jesus made that statement it put us out of the stone-throwing business for good! He was not saying, "If one of you can search your heart and find no sin there, that man has my permission to commence stoning." He knew that was never going to happen.

He who is without sin is Jesus Himself; He is the only one qualified to judge and punish others. The men in that crowd may not have understood who He was talking about, but they did recognize it couldn't be any of them, so they went away one at a time, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there before the one who brings peace and justice.

Incarnate Purity standing confronting the saddest thing in all human life, convicted impurity. If we did not know the story so well, and we were hearing it for the first time, we should

almost stop with bated breath and say, what did He do? First of all, He called her by the same name which He used for His Mother, at Cana, and on His cross, “woman.” Whenever that word fell from the lips of Jesus, it was a word of infinite tenderness.<sup>1</sup>

“*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*” Her reply was likely difficult for her to believe, “*No one, sir.*” “*Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.*” He gave her a choice, for we all have a choice to accept or reject the love and grace of Jesus. He did not condemn her as a person, but the act she committed. If she would accept His grace she would live in a new way, one very different from that which brought her to that place.

No stones were thrown that day, except perhaps on the ground when the men left that place. Maybe for the adulteress they served as a reminder that she had to leave her sins there also and go out into a new life of forgiveness and redemption. Can we relate the forgiveness of our sins by God to the forgiveness of our sins by each other? I pray that we can, because there are not enough rocks to go around if we can't.

Because Christ loves all of us, He offers a very special kind of relationship to those who respond to His love and invitation. That invitation, of course, was made known to another of His followers, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the council which demanded Christ's death. John 3:16 is perhaps the most familiar verse of the gospel, and though it was spoken for the entire world, it was first revealed in a private night time conversation, just as Christ introduced Himself as the Messiah to a single person.

His love for all of us comes down from the love His Father has for Him. The image Jesus used in John 15 was a natural, organic one that His hearers would have understood well. A vine is the very picture of growth and fruitfulness. Unlike a tree comprised of different structures that do not resemble each other as much, a vine shows itself to be sturdy, adaptable, and productive in relationship to itself.

God uses Jesus as a vine and acts Himself as the keeper of the vineyard. His work is to tend and prune and trim to ensure a more productive vine. Jesus continually gives nourishment and intimate relationship to the branches so that they may mature and remain vital. We have a choice real branches do not have. We can break off from Jesus and become withered and lifeless.

So Jesus remind us what is needed to prevent our spiritual demise and moral decay. We obey Him, we look to Him, we grow in Him, because separated from Him we are powerless to grow. Love is what flows from the Father to the Son to us. It is the nutrition we need to stay obedient because love is the most fulfilling gift to the soul.

All Jesus asked of those disciples and of us is that we remain in Him; in relationship, in word, in unity. Part of that request is to be connected to each other as well, because as a part of the

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<sup>1</sup>Morgan, G. Campbell, *The Gospel According to John*, pg. 149

vine the same flow of love from Father to Son to us runs through us all. If we remain in His love we can also remain in His word, learning and applying and enjoying it in our lives so that others can see it at work within us.

The connection is maintained by obedience and prayer. Love is the relationship that unites the disciples to Christ as branches are united to a vine. Two results stem from this relationship; obedience and joy. Obedience marks the cause of fruitfulness; joy is its result. Jesus intended that the disciples' lives should be both spontaneous and happy rather than burdensome and boring.

Obedience in carrying out His purpose would be a guarantee of success, for Jesus never planned failure for His disciples. Joy logically follows when the disciples realize that the life of Christ in them is bringing fruit; something they could never produce in their own strength.<sup>2</sup>

In relationship with Jesus we find solace, strength and solidarity. We belong to a larger body of believers all with the same opportunity to know Christ more closely and more definitively. The apostle Paul prayed for his churches to become deeper in their faith and more connected to the source of their belief.

*In his words, "I pray that he would give you inner strength and power through his Spirit. Then Christ will live in you through faith. I also pray that love may be the ground into which you sink your roots and on which you have your foundation. This way, with all of God's people you will be able to understand how wide, long, high, and deep his love is. You will know Christ's love, which goes far beyond any knowledge. I am praying this so that you may be completely filled with God."*

That's what we are meant to have, a better understanding of how much Christ loves us, together with all believers. There is no sibling rivalry here, no jealousy over Jesus caring more for someone else than He does for us. Not even the love that is beyond our ability to know is impossible for us to possess because God wants us to be complete in all the gifts He wants to give us, gifts of love and grace and compassion.

With this knowledge we are well equipped to go beyond our friendship with Jesus and move toward the desire to know Him with everything that makes us who we are. The journey is at our pace, but it is ours to take. No one else can get us to that place where we see Christ in every moment of our lives.

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<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, Frank E., general editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9, John and Acts*, pg. 152