



**For the Love of Friends**  
**Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (5-9-21)**

In the last 15 years social media has taken off exponentially bridging people together across the globe. During the pandemic, social media has helped us to stay connected and to conduct business. But there is something peculiar about it. It has transformed the meaning of the word “friend.” On social media you may “friend” someone using the word as a verb meaning “to add someone to a list of contacts associated with a social networking website.” To “befriend” someone is archaic. If you want to keep up with the times, you need to “friend” someone. What this has done, though, is to blur the line between “friends” and “acquaintances” with the latter term being virtually ignored, making it potentially another archaic term. One may request to “friend” someone on the basis of social interests even if there is a loose or totally absent emotional association with that person. It used to be that one was very careful and selective in regards to friendships. The Bible has much to say about friendship, but the passage I turn again and again is from ch. 6 of the book of Ecclesiastes (aka Sirach):

- 14 Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter:  
    whoever finds one has found a treasure.
- 15 Faithful friends are beyond price;  
    no amount can balance their worth.
- 16 Faithful friends are life-saving medicine;  
    and those who fear the Lord will find them.
- 17 Those who fear the Lord direct their friendship aright,  
    for as they are, so are their neighbors also.

Jesus talks about friendship in today’s gospel. True friendship is costly: a good friend is ready to give his/her life for the friend. He is ready to apply that philosophy to his own life and gives us the parameter for true love. Some friends are worth dying for. He qualifies what he means by “friend” when he says: “You are my friends *if* you do what I command you.” (John 15:14) Jesus is not manipulating or imposing on us. He is simply giving us the framework for godly living much in line with Yahweh’s commandments given to Moses on mount Sinai over a thousand years earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus seems to be the in-between person, the mediator between people that have different religion, customs, and interests, and are quite at odds with each other even to the point of being enemies such as Jews and Gentiles. He is kind of saying, “I am friend with both of you and how much I’d love it if you became friends to one another. Look, you have me in between the two of you. Turn to me when you are in a dispute. Do as I do when you and I disagree. Let my sacrifice of love bring you reconciliation. I’ll give my life for you and I ask nothing in return. Will you let me be your friend?” When he says that, it is difficult to argue with that conditional “*if*.” He initiates the sharing of his life that will enable friendship to flourish, pulling his disciples from a

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21



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hierarchical master-slave relationship (lender-debtor, teacher-student, or any other power over structure) into a non-hierarchical, equalizing, friend-to-friend relationship.

The book of Acts reports chapter after chapter how Christianity spread to the ends of the earth through costly friendship. It's amazing to see how the work of the Holy Spirit has transformed enemies who were ethnically, culturally, and ideologically distant into friends in the name of Jesus, meaning people capable of extending hospitality to one another once they have accepted Jesus' invitation through his conditional "if."

Today's passage is part of a much larger story that spans two chapters (10:1-11:18,) and tells of the Spirit-infused breaking down of barriers between Jews and Gentiles.

We are at the end of the centurion Cornelius' story, a devout and very generous man who has embraced the God of the Jews. God brings together Peter and Cornelius for the purpose of continuing to expand the message of salvation through Jesus to all nations. The circumcised believers are taken by surprise: Gentiles receive the gift of the Holy Spirit prior to Baptism. The God we worship is a free God, unconstrained by religious or social norms, and unafraid to show up at the center of political power (they are at Caesarea, "the Roman capital of Judea and thus a symbol of Gentile power."<sup>2</sup> This was not *simply* a Gentile household; it was a *really* Gentile household. No wonder Peter's circumcised companions are amazed.) The story ends with the profound realization by the church leadership in Jerusalem that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). Incredible. An ages old racial barrier has been broken. The whole church affirms that God is doing something new through the Spirit: the revelation that nothing that God has created is unclean (and unwanted) opens the believers' horizons and hearts to creative forms of hospitality and inclusivity. The concept of friendship in Christ now expands and creates a new universal community. Love as Jesus intends it is expressed in the communion we have with one another, not of our making born of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. As the Reverend Methodist Bishop and author Kenneth H. Carter explains, "There are no individual, solitary Christians. I cannot be a Christian without you, and you cannot be a Christian without me. God designed it this way. So a part of our conversion is into the communion, the believers, the household of God."

It is evident from the story of Cornelius that the Spirit of God didn't just come down on the disciples on the day of Pentecost but continues to freely descend on people of good will throughout the world and at any time to grant forgiveness and freedom (Acts 10:43). Pentecost, therefore, is more than an annual "Church" commemoration but is an ongoing movement of the Spirit which continues to affect people of all times and regions of the Earth. The Spirit of God

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Holladay, Acts: A Commentary, 240.



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who moved freely among the disciples moves now freely through uncircumcised converts. There is no need to shun Gentiles as legally unclean and socially unwelcome. The tribal view that the Roman occupier is by definition an enemy of the people loses its appeal and veracity. Gentiles are no longer looked at with suspicion and animosity. Boundaries and differences are overcome by the common reality of being children of God and both Jews and Gentiles are brought together in one Church, making of the two one people sharing one Baptism and one Lord. The apostles Paul insists on this theme in his writing over and over again. To the Ephesians (4:4-6) he writes:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.<sup>3</sup>

And in the letter to the Colossians (3:9-11), we read:

Don't lie to one another. You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Oh, how the refreshing presence of the Spirit is needed today? How much need is there for the reshaping of society into a new people motivated solely by the desire to bring wholeness and well being to the nation? How much cleansing of heart and restoration of true humanity is urgently needed in a world incapable of speaking to one another and of bridging the gulf of suspicion that separates us? How much are we in need of a renewed spirit capable of breaking through the hatred and anger that blind us to one another.

The movement from tribalism to communion is evident. May we become friends. May we be friends. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> This particular version is from NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> This particular version is from The Message