

## Our Friend Indeed

John 15:1-17

*Maunder Thursday/March 28, 2024*

Our closing hymn on Palm Sunday that sent us into Holy Week was “My Song Is Love Unknown.” The text was written by the English Reformed pastor Samuel Crossman (1623-1683) in 1664 and was set to music by John Ireland (1879-1962) in 1918. It’s one of my favorite hymns, and I drew attention to some of the theological dimensions of the piece in last Sunday’s [sermon](#). In this extremely personal, even intimate poem, Crossman refers to Jesus as his friend, using a capital “F.” “He came from heaven’s throne salvation to bestow; the world that was his own would not its Savior know. But O my Friend, my Friend indeed, who at my need this life did spend!” And, “Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine; never was love, dear King, never was grief like thine. This is my Friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.”<sup>1</sup>

Crossman’s identification of Jesus as *Friend* is not that unusual, surprising, or even all that radical for us, perhaps. As we know, before his death, Jesus told his disciples, from that moment on, he would no longer call them servants, but friends (Jn. 15:15). However, what is unusual, surprising is that Jesus, as John describes him, this Jesus—the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29), the bread of life (Jn. 6:35, 48, 51), the light of the world (Jn. 8:12-; 9:5), the door of the sheep (Jn. 10:7, 9), the good shepherd (Jn. 10:11,14), the resurrection and the life (Jn. 11:25), the way, the truth, the life (Jn. 14:6), the true vine (Jn. 15:10), the Word made flesh (Jn. 1:14)—considers us not servants, but friends. *This* is radical. It almost takes one’s breath away.

In our Facebook world, where we might have many friends who are more acquaintances than real friends, we’ve cheapened the meaning of friendship. In the first century, friendship was a serious affair. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) said, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book VIII), there are three types of friendship. There are friendships of pleasure, friendships of utility or usefulness, and friendships of virtue. Aristotle called this last category “perfect friendship—the virtuous friendship of equals. He contends that if persons are not equals, temptation always exists for the friendship to become one of pleasure or utility. Friends of pleasure or utility come to an end when they no longer serve our needs, we then end the relationship or friendship. According to Aristotle, “true friends are attracted to each other because of the good they see in each other, not for personal advantage, but simple and true good. True friends are persons who wish each well and do whatever is necessary for the other.”<sup>2</sup> This understanding of perfect friendship would have been familiar to those in Jesus’ world. But that Jesus, who as the image of God, should say this, that this is how God sees us, as a type of perfect friend, that’s astonishing.

What makes a friend a true friend? A friend is a trusted companion who wants the best for us, who loves us for who we are not and for selfish gain. A friend is one who suffers with us and sometimes for us. A friend stands with us, rescues us in times of trouble, one who picks us up when we fall. A friend corrects and challenges us. A friend says no to us as well as yes. A friend tells the truth. Supports us. Holds us. Wants the best for us. And does all of this, and more, even when are not very good friends to them.

I invite you this evening to allow this image of *friend* to become the lens through which we approach the table of our friend, the one who invites us here, breaking bread and sharing the cup. And I invite you to allow this image of friendship to frame how we hear the story of the Passion tonight and tomorrow and Saturday, as we wait for Sunday.

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<sup>1</sup>John Ireland, "My Song Is Love Unknown," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Maureen A. Tilley from a lecture given at Villanova University in 2011.

<https://www1.villanova.edu/dam/villanova/mission/mission---ministry/Magazine/2012.pdf>