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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

So, what is the line, sisters and brothers in Christ? You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family.

You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family.

That seems to be the theme of today's gospel reading.

You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family.

Jesus says, "I have called you friends, because I have made known everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you."

PAUSE

Now, we probably don't realize how radical a concept it is, for Jesus to call us friends.

We probably are unaware of what it meant to be friends in Jesus' day.

You see, in the time when Jesus lived and ministered here on earth, was during the time of the ancient Roman Empire.

And it was such that during that time in the Roman Empire, a hierarchical system existed based on what was called the client-patron system.

You may have heard me talk about this before.

But, during that time in the Roman Empire, people were basically divided between patrons and clients.

Patrons were typically wealthy Romans who lived in the higher echelons of society.

And the clients were those who lived a much more meager existence in the lower echelons.

The clients depended upon the generosity of patrons for their daily sustenance.

In fact, clients showed up at the homes of their patrons early in the morning, and would receive money or food from their patrons for that day.

And this went on each and every day—the clients showing up at their patrons homes for food and money.

It makes us wonder about the words from the Lord's Prayer—"Give us this day our daily bread."

One has to wonder if Christians thought of God as their patron who provided daily sustenance to God's many clients.

"Give us this day our daily bread."

So, this is what clients RECEIVED from their patrons, in this client-patron relationship. They received their daily sustenance.

But what did patrons receive in return? They received honor.

Indeed, the client's role in this client-patron relationship was to praise the patron for their generosity.

In fact, clients would follow around their patron during the day announcing loudly the graciousness of their patron.

It is almost like so many groupies who follow around rockstars.

Or so many fans who follow around their favorite movie star or sport's hero.

To be sure, each patron had their own entourage that would accompany them throughout the day.

And, for the patron it was a matter of prestige to have a large entourage.

Honor became such valued commodity for patrons, that a sort of competition even developed among wealthy patrons in Roman society.

There was competition among patrons about who had the largest entourage, who received the most honor.

Today, we talk about how many Twitter followers a person has.

Today, we talk about how many friends a person has on FaceBook.

But, in ancient Rome, followers consisted of real life people who followed around their patron.

Again, it gives us a new perspective when read in the Bible about how crowds of people followed Jesus around.

Thus, Jesus was afforded much honor.

And so, it also behooved patrons to free their personal slaves, because freed slaves became clients of their former master, which then just added all the more to the patron's honor and prestige.

So, this is how the hierarchical system worked in the ancient Roman Empire.

There were clients and there were patrons.

And sometimes, yes, clients could also be patrons of those who were below them on the proverbial social ladder.

And, as one acquired more and more honor and prestige, one worked one's way up the social ladder.

PAUSE

But, there was also one other classification of people during this time besides clients and patrons, and that was friends.

The Latin word for "friend" is amicus.

And this is the word by which wealthy patrons of the high echelons of Roman society would use to describe their relationship.

The wealthy patrons were of equal stature and so there was no hierarchy among them, there were no patrons and clients in their sphere of influence.

Wealthy patrons were just friends to one another.

And so, sisters and brothers in Christ, it quite telling in our gospel lesson that Jesus calls us friends.

In fact, Jesus says, "I do not call you servants," or "slaves," which is how the Greek text reads...

"I do not call you slaves any longer, because the slave does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends."

Did we see that? Did we see what Jesus just did here?

I do not call you slaves any longer, but I have called you friends.

Did you notice what Jesus did? No? Maybe we are missing it.

We who were once slaves of a master, are now called friends.

No, I still don't think we are getting it, and so let me break it down for us.

We, who were once slaves of sin and death, have been freed from our bondage to sin and death...

We, who were once enslaved, have been freed in Christ.

And as persons who have been freed, at most we would become clients of our patron Jesus Christ.

The patrons in ancient Roman society might liberate their slaves, but as we noted, those slaves would then be called clients.

There was still a hierarchy going on.

But, we, who were once enslaved and now have been freed from sin and death, are not called clients by Jesus.

No, Jesus goes beyond what Roman society dictates.

Jesus goes beyond what Roman society called for, and Jesus elevates us all the way to friendship.

We are on equal footing with Jesus, like wealthy patrons who existed in Roman society side by side.

There is no hierarchy with God in Christ Jesus.

There is no person of higher status than another in this new reality created in Christ Jesus.

We stand as friends to one another and with Christ.

And that is what is so radical about this passage from John 15.

That is what is so radical about Jesus' message.

I do not call you slaves any longer, but I have called you friends.

We are amicus to Jesus. Jesus is amicus to us. We are amicus to each other.

Now, we may be saying to each other, "Big deal."

We may be saying to ourselves, "So what? What difference does that have on my life?"

What different does it make if long ago Jesus decided that instead of describing God's people, who are freed from sin and death, as "clients," Jesus instead called God's people "friends."

So what? Who cares? What's it matter?

Well, it actually matters quite a bit.

Because what Jesus is saying is that there is no hierarchy when it comes to people.

There are not some people who are better than others.

There are not some people who hold greater status than others.

Some people who are deemed more important than others.

Some people who are valued more than others.

Some people who have more honor, or prestige, or social rank than others.

Sure, our society would seem to suggest otherwise.

Our society would seem to suggest that if you have more money...

...or more fame, or more power, or have a particular skin tone...

...or a specific gender identity, or a particular educational background, or a specific citizenship status...

If you have certain things in your favor, well then you are higher up the social rank than other people.

That is what our society would suggest.

We see this truth on television, we hear on the news, we see around us in life.

But, even though our society would certainly make a case for a social hierarchy, Jesus tells us it just isn't so.

God's grace is so radical, God's grace is so mindboggling, that God's grace makes you and me, and all people friends of Christ.

And if we are friends of Christ, we are to be friends with each other and friends with all people whom God has saved through the power of his cross.

No person is of greater stature than you and me.

No person is of lower stature either.

We all exist on the common, equal plane.

And, for Jesus this is the root definition of friendship.

PAUSE

Now, friendship means probably many things to many of us.

Friendship might be defined by some as having a profound respect for another person.

Friendship might be defined by some as being able to trust another person, as being able to be open and honest with another person.

Friendship might be defined by some as knowing that other person has your back, that they are there for you.

But friendship should, and must also be defined as being on an equal plane with another person, that we don't lord it over that other, that we are not superior or better than that other.

Nor is that other better than us, such that we are somehow inferior.

Friendship is a relationship of equals.

And I do believe that part of the problem that causes so many divides in our culture.

Part of reason why we have this group or that group of people at odds with this other or that other group of people...

What is fundamentally broken in society is our ability to make friends with persons who are different from us.

Whether we are talking ideological differences, or party differences, or differences in race, color, creed, or sexual orientation...

We need to be able to make friendships with a diverse group of people, because I believe if we can truly become friends with just one person in a group of people who are different from us, it helps to change how we see all those people in a certain group, and our friend hopefully can see differently all the people in the group we belong to.

We have to be willing to make friends with persons not like ourselves.

We just can't surround ourselves with people like us.

I mean, we can, but it really limits not only our own growth as a person, but also the growth of others, and the growth of our whole human family—to just be around people like ourselves.

We need to make friends, such that we are willing to share a meal with that other person, and laugh with that other person, and be open and honest with that other person.

It takes work, I won't lie to you, but it is some of the most rewarding work we can do in this world.

And, as I try to remind myself, either we can begin to do this important work of making friends here in this world, or we will have to learn to make friends with others come the time when we die and we arrive at our heavenly home.

But it seems to me to make the most sense that we would work at getting friendship right in the here and now.

Heaven seems awfully late, doesn't it?, to only then begin working on making friends with others. Amen.