

“JESUS – OUR FRIEND”  
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Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Fifth Sunday of Lent

John 11:1-45

Three weeks in a row now – have you noticed that for three weeks in a row now you’ve been invited to stay seated for the Gospel lesson because they’ve been so long? These stories of John are long and complicated, but John has a lot to say. There’s a lot to all of these stories we’ve been reading. The first, you remember, was about the woman at the well. The second, last week, was the healing of the man blind from birth, and today is the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Why are they all so long? Well, because these stories, like most stories in life, are not simple. A lot of factors go into making the situations what they are, and John lays them all out for us.

Today’s story too is long and filled with a lot of mini-stories, if you will. The bottom line, of course, is that a man who was dead, was brought back to life. And indeed, I could have preached on that, but, as you might suspect, I’ll be preaching on that – big time – two weeks from today! So, instead I decided to focus this morning on one more way that Jesus was revealed to us – and that is as friend.

Have you ever thought about Jesus having friends? Maybe not. Oh, we know he had family, and we know he had followers, disciples, and we know he had a lot of people around him – but Jesus as friend? Maybe not. But let’s think about it more closely this morning.

What exactly is a friend? Just for sport, I googled the word friend and, as you might imagine, there were thousands of words available about it. Dictionary.com defines a friend as “a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard.” True, but not exactly warm and fuzzy words, are they?

Well, listen to a few of these thoughts about friendship:

C. S. Lewis wrote: Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, “What! You, too? I thought I was the only one!”

Someone else said: A friend is a person who does his knocking before he enters instead of after he leaves. (Think about that for a minute!)

A couple that I know you've heard before –

A friend is someone who knows all about you and loves you just the same.

A friend is one who comes in when the whole world has gone out.

And finally, one from an expert on being a friend – Winnie the Pooh!

If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day so I never have to live without you.

(On-line, [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com))

Oh, there is nothing like having a friend, and today, in this lesson from John, we see again the friendship between Jesus, and siblings Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We don't know all the details of their friendship, but we do know some things. We know from this lesson that Mary was the one who had anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. We know from another Gospel, Luke, that Jesus frequently went to their home and had meals with them – because there's that famous story of Martha complaining to Jesus because she was going crazy trying to make a meal for Him, while Mary was just sitting there at his feet, doing nothing. And then here, today, when Jesus arrives at the tomb, it is clear that He is mourning the death of a dear friend.

So what was it like to have Jesus as their friend? Well, this morning I want to lift up just a few things that I think marked their friendship. The first was hospitality. Clearly, their home was a place of rest and relaxation for Jesus. As I said earlier, we don't hear of many times when Jesus went to a specific home – but we do hear about the occasions He was in the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It must have been a place where he could let his hair down and relax, not have to be “on” as it were, not have to be looking over His shoulder at crowds closing in on Him. It was a place of rest and peace.

Yet, their friendship was not all peaceful – no, the second thing I would call it was “challenging.” Look at some of the conversations they had – they were not easy. I mean Jesus had to look into the eyes of Martha, whom He loved, and lovingly chastise her, for in her zeal to make everything perfect for Him for dinner, she had forgotten what was important in life. And lovingly, He told her that. It couldn't have been easy for her to hear, and surely, she must have wanted to interrupt him, saying, “But Jesus . . .” still, Jesus loved her, no, He was such a good friend to her, that He had the tough conversation with her. As one person put it so aptly, “Jesus tried to perfect her, not pamper her.” (On-line, Sermoncentral.com, Brian Atwood)

And the challenge went both ways. In today's lesson, it's the women asking the tough questions of Jesus! First Martha and then Mary, with broken hearts, pleaded with Him – "If you had been here, Lazarus wouldn't have died!" They were angry, and heartbroken, and frustrated, and they let their friend know it in no uncertain terms. Did that make them bad friends? No. It made them friends who trusted and loved Jesus enough to know that they could say what they felt, and He would still love them.

That's what friends do. They can have those tough conversations and challenge one another, because in the end, they'll still be there. Friendships are based on trust – that each wants what is best for the other; and they're based on honesty – of all the people in the world you know that your friend will be honest with you, even if something is hard to hear. (Ladies – you know that, don't you? A real friend will tell you when something doesn't look good on you, when everybody else says you look fine!)

A third mark of friendship that surely was present in this relationship between Jesus and these three siblings is deep and abiding love. Jesus loved them, really loved them. And when He stood at the grave of His friend Lazarus, you could see it – for He wept like the rest of them. He wept real tears of sadness, grief and loss. That's what friends do. They weep for you, and weep with you.

One day, many, many years ago, I went to a breakfast meeting with two colleagues in ministry. We were in a clergy support group, and there was one pastor from each denomination allowed in the group. It was a wonderful place to share your feelings, and because there was only one person per denomination in the group, you could openly share your feelings about your church and your denomination without fear. At any rate, one day just three of us were able to meet, and we met over breakfast. When we sat down, it was clear that one of them was very upset. He asked us to listen to something that he had written to his congregation. It was a letter of resignation, in which he confessed to wrongdoing. It was heartbreaking to listen to him as he read, and as I listened, tears starting to stream down my face.

When he finished, the three of us talked about it for a long time, and then it came time for us to leave, and he said something to me which I will never forget. He said, "Thank you for crying with me."

I think when Mary and Martha saw Jesus crying with them that day it meant the world to them. They could see how much He loved Lazarus and loved them. That's what friendship is all about.

Now, if all this morning was about was Jesus and his friendship with these three people, that would be okay. But it's not – it's about so much more – it's about Jesus being friends with you and me as well.

Those same hallmarks of their friendship are what makes our friendship with Him so wonderful as well. We find our home with Him, our center, our place of rest and peace. When the world threatens to overwhelm us, when troubles try to take us down, when we're afraid and feeling alone, He is our home, our center – the place we can be just who we are, and know that that's okay.

Yet, we know that our friendship with Him can also be – and surely sometimes is – challenging. You know what it's like when the Spirit stirs up something in you that lets you know you should be doing something – or you shouldn't be doing something! That feeling that won't go away? That's Jesus at work in your life perfecting you, not pampering you. Jesus – your friend.

And finally, with Jesus as our friend, we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are loved by Him with a deep and abiding love. We know that there are times that He weeps about us, but we also know that there are times when He weeps with us – friend with friend. He knows our cares, He bears our burdens, He feels our sadness and sorrows. He's there with a deep and abiding love – ever and always.

Let me draw to a close by telling you about someone who knew that deep in his heart – an Irish man by the name of Joseph Scriven. Born in 1819, he was educated at Trinity College in London, and went on to become a schoolteacher. He fell in love with a wonderful young woman, and proposed to her. Tragically, on the day before they were to be married, she drowned while swimming.

Heartbroken and overcome by his grief, he moved to Canada, to try to start over. He got a job, found a home, and indeed, made a new life for himself. He also fell in love again, but unbelievably not long before they were to marry, his fiancée grew sick and died.

He was shattered, and the only thing he could do was cling to his faith. So he began to pray without ceasing, and take part in a Bible study, and as he did he felt a call on his life to do something more – a mission, of sorts. He took a vow of poverty and gave everything he had to the physically disabled and financially destitute.

A number of years later, Scriven received word that his mother was dying in Ireland, but now he didn't have the funds to go back and be with her. Heartsick that he couldn't be by her side, he wrote the story of his life and faith journey in

three short verses – and called it “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” – the hymn we sang as we started the service this morning.

(On-line, [www.sdretire.com](http://www.sdretire.com))

What a friend Mary, Martha and Lazarus had in Jesus! What a friend Joseph Scriven had in Him! And what a friend you and I have in Him! As you come to communion this morning, and spend time in prayer after receiving, turn to Jesus, and thank Him for being your Friend – ever and always!

Amen.