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Sermon 9 May 2021

Title: Fruit, Friends, and Figures of Speech

- Good morning church, we are so glad that you are with us today on this beautiful Spring morning—I know it’s probably raining while you’re watching this—but it IS Spring, even if we did see some snow this week—that one day, I think it was Wednesday, we saw snow and hail and sunshine and I don’t know what else—Jim Barclay told me “Welcome to Scotland, where we have all four seasons in one day,” and that’s just about the truth, but we trust that you have had a blessed week, meteorological vagaries notwithstanding.
- I appreciated so much, and I’m sure you did too, Mike McAdory and the Midland Valley Church of the Nazarene’s Praise team doing that friendship medley—that was just wonderful, and you know there are so many other songs that could have been included, but we’d have been here all day if we’d heard all the songs about friends and friendship that we could have added—songs like the theme song from the TV show “Friends,” or from the Golden Girls, “Thank you for being a friend,” or Queen’s “You’re my best friend,” or Kenny Loggins and Stevie Nicks’ “Whenever I call you friend”—even Garth Brooks’ “I’ve got friends in low places”—there’s “I need a friend” by the Cowsills—that one probably dates me just a little bit; there’s “Waiting on a friend” by the Rolling Stones; “Old Friends” by Simon and Garfunkel; “I get by with a little help from my friends” by the Beatles—and you can probably think of one or two more—but no musical compilation about friends, particularly in the context of a gospel sermon, would

be complete without the definitive tune, and that's this 1982 classic called "Jesus is My Friend" by the Christian band called "Sonseed" (video clip)—

- And that is just about enough of that—now I could be wrong, but I have a suspicion that had it not been for the internet, "Sonseed" would likely have remained in relative obscurity—I really doubt that much of anybody would have ever known who they were—and not many people did know who Sonseed were for more than 20 years after that video was recorded in 1982, but then in the early 2000s, somebody uploaded it to YouTube—and do you know that thanks to YouTube, that little video has been viewed 13 million times—can you imagine? 13 million. And counting—that number continues to increase. When a seed—a Sonseed-- is planted you really never know how it's going to grow and bear fruit.
- Bearing fruit is one of the things that Jesus was talking to his disciples about in last week's passage of scripture from the gospel of John chapter 15, verses 1-8. And when we looked at that scripture last week we pointed out that chapter 15 is right in the middle of a discourse that Jesus gives to his disciples—a few chapters that are sometimes referred to as Jesus' comforting his disciples before the events of the passion and crucifixion—Jesus is preparing them for a trying time, a time of loss, a time of catharsis, a time of pruning we might say, to use the figure of speech that Jesus used in last week's scripture.
- We heard last week that Jesus refers to his disciples as the branches of the vine that He himself is, and Jesus told them that those branches were pruned by the vinegrower, that's God the Father. But that pruning was not without purpose—the vinegrower prunes the branches so that they bear fruit—and those branches that don't bear fruit the vinegrower removes.

- And so last week we heard that Jesus had two instructions for his disciples—the first was that they should abide in Him, and He would abide in them, and if they did so they would bear fruit and become His disciples, and they could, and this is the second instruction, ask for whatever they wished and it would be done.
- Now this week’s scripture is from Chapter 15, verses 9-17—so these verses are immediately following those that we heard last week.
- And Jesus is still talking to his disciples about what they need to remember and what they need to do—particularly in light of the trying times that they are about to find themselves in the middle of. And we’re going to hear some of the same themes that we heard Jesus refer to last week when he used the metaphor of the vine and the branches, but this week he moves beyond that figure of speech and begins not only to clarify its meaning, but also to introduce some new ideas to it.
- And we see this combination of previous themes and new ideas in verse 9, where Jesus expands on what He has already said about abiding but adds a new concept—love.
- In verse 9 Jesus says: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.
- Now this word “love” here—it’s *agape*—that self-sacrificing, self-emptying love that Jesus has spoken of so often—and notice that He uses the word 3 times in this verse—referring to the love not only of Jesus for His disciples, but of the Father for Jesus—just as there was a relationship between the vinegrower and the vine and the branches, and before that between the owner of the sheep and the Good Shepherd and the sheep, now Jesus expands on what it means to “abide” by telling his disciples to “abide in His *agape*”—but how do they do that? What does it mean to “abide in His *agape*”?

- We find the answer to that question in verse 10. Jesus tells the disciples: If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.
- Here we hear that "just as" language again—the Greek for "just as" is *kathos*, and John uses this "just as" motif 31 times in His gospel—here Jesus says "JUST AS the Father loved me, so I love you—abide in my love—and you abide in my love by keeping my commandments JUST AS I have kept the Father's commandments and abide in His love"—so Jesus is the example for the disciples of what it means to abide in *agape*.
- And then in verse 11 Jesus tells His disciples WHY he is telling them these things—for what PURPOSE: He says "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."
- Now think about what's happening here—Jesus is about to face torture and humiliation and suffering and crucifixion and death—and He's talking about his JOY. The Greek there is *chara*—and it means not just joy but exceeding gladness—it's related to the word grace and refers to being aware of God's grace and favour—it is what you feel when you rejoice—and here Jesus is Himself facing the passion and crucifixion, and knows that the disciples are about to face the stress and the grief and the confusion and anxiety that the crucifixion will bring—and yet Jesus says that He is telling them the things that He is telling them in order to prepare them so that His JOY might be in them and their JOY might be complete."
- Facing a time of trial you might expect that Jesus would say "I'm telling you these things so that my strength might be in you, so that you can take courage and bravely face the trials to come—or perhaps so that my endurance and patience and stoicism might be in

you—so you can look beyond the pain you’re feeling to some greater purpose—but Jesus doesn’t say that, He talks about joy.

- Even as He prepares his disciples for times of persecution and loss, Jesus offers them joy. That’s because the outcome of keeping Jesus’ commandments, of abiding in his *agape*, is joy—the joy of knowing that we are recipients of God’s favour and grace—even in times of pruning, even in times of trial and sorrow---complete, filled-full joy. Abiding in Jesus’ *agape* is not a matter of resignation or grim-faced servitude or delusional ignorance of how hard life can be—it is a matter of joy.
- Keep my commandments and your joy will be complete Jesus says—keep my commandments and you will abide in my *agape*, Jesus says.
- And in verse 12, Jesus makes it quite clear what commandment his disciples are to follow in order to abide in his *agape* and be filled with His joy. Jesus says: This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.
- If you were reading straight through John’s gospel these words would sound very familiar, because just 2 chapters back, in Chapter 13, verse 34, after washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus has said to them: 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. JUST AS I have loved you, you also should love one another.
- Remember what we have said before about the way that John uses repetition for emphasis—he repeats those things he wants to make sure his reader notices.
- In chapter 15 and back in chapter 13, Jesus is projecting into the future a bit, because his disciples don’t yet know just what “as I have loved you” really means—that is, the crucifixion and resurrection haven’t taken place yet—but in time, the disciples will come to understand just how deep this *agape* that Jesus is talking about really is

- But Jesus is also giving his disciples this commandment because He knows what is coming—he knows what they are about to face—not only are they going to face the loss, the death and burial of Jesus, but they are going to have to face the implications of that death—they are going to have to face their own fears when they realise that the authorities who exercise brutal and absolute control over themselves and their neighbours have the kind of power than can neutralise someone like Jesus—someone who turns water into wine, who calms the storm, who walks on water, who makes the blind to see, who even raises the dead—even someone with that kind of supernatural power is no match for the power of the State—and when the authorities have tortured and humiliated and killed and buried Jesus—the disciples are going to be tempted to think “well, if they could do that to Jesus, what could they do to me?”
- And no doubt in their fear and confusion and grief, they would be tempted to start blaming each other—thinking things like, “It’s all Judas’ fault,” or “if Peter hadn’t denied him, things might have been different,” or “surely Matthew could have figured a way out of this”—and knowing the kinds of thoughts and fears that the disciples might have fallen prey to, Jesus prepares them to face the trial—to face the loss—to face the time of pruning—when he says “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”
- “As I have loved you.” What does that look like? What WILL that look like? It will look like what Jesus said the Good Shepherd does for the flock-- No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.
- No one has greater *agape* than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.
- And Jesus adds “you are my friends if you do what I command you.”

- Now that shouldn't be read as a mere threat—Jesus is not saying simply “you better do what I command or you're not my friend”—he's saying more than that-- he is saying “I will lay down my life for my friends, and you are my friends, the ones for whom I lay down my life when you love each other as I love you—and lay down your lives for each other.”
- And here the intensity of the kind of dedication and commitment to each other that Jesus is calling for becomes clear—Jesus isn't just telling his disciples, “Hey listen, times are going to get tough, but keep a stiff upper lip and be brave and try to get along—don't blame each other for what's about to happen”—no, Jesus says “you are to love—to show *agape*—that self-sacrificing, self-emptying love—love each other the way that I have loved you—by laying down your very lives for each other.”
- I don't think that this is simply a commandment to those disciples to whom Jesus was speaking in John 15 so that they could make it through to the resurrection—although it is that—and I also think that this is more than just a message that says to us that if we're ever in an emergency situation or a natural disaster on a battlefield we ought to sacrifice our lives for the lives of others--I believe that this is a command to those disciples who were there with Jesus and also to every follower of Jesus thereafter who abides in his *agape* and follows his commandments—I think we see disciples in the early church laying down their lives-- not only when Luke tells us in Acts that Stephen was martyred but also when he tells us that those in the church sold what they had for anyone who had need—I think that's laying down one's life—I think “laying down our lives” is what Paul means when he tells the church at Philippi “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

- Laying down our lives for others is what happens anytime anyone sets aside their own goals and ambitions and desires and says “not my will but Thine, O Lord,” -- anytime anybody says I’m tired of working for the things that don’t satisfy, for the stuff that doesn’t last, and I’m laying those pursuits at the foot of the cross and presenting myself as a living sacrifice that can be used as God sees fit for the building of the Kingdom—I am dying to self and becoming alive in Christ.
- You are my friends, Jesus says, when you love each other as I have loved you.
- This is what Jesus calls “a new commandment” in chapter 13, and I think that part of what is new about it can be found in the words Jesus uses here in Chapter 15. Jesus tells us that there’s “no greater love—that’s *agape*—than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”—and the root of the word that’s translated as friends there is “*philos*”
- And you may remember that we’ve talked about the 4 different kinds of love before, and here Jesus mentions two of them—the first, of course is *agape*, that divine, self-sacrificial love, and the second is *philos*—the love or affection between friends—*philos* shows up in English words like *philosophy* and *Philadelphia* and *Francophile*
- And so what Jesus is doing here is inviting his disciples to move beyond *philos*—that friendly love, the affection of friendship or just fondness for someone—to *agape*—Jesus is saying that the greatest love is having *agape* toward those that you would be expected to only have *philos* for—your friends.
- So in Jesus’ way of thinking, friends become not simply those whose company you enjoy, not just those who are loyal to you and who work for your benefit and cheer you up when you’re feeling down, not just your buddies or your pals, but friends become those for whom you would lay down your very life, and who would lay down their lives for you as well.



- And Jesus tells his disciples that not only is this the way they should understand their relationships with the other disciples, it is the way they are to understand their relationship with Him. Jesus tells them in verse 14 “YOU are my friends if you do what I command you.” And then in verse 15 Jesus gets even more explicit—he says: I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.
- Now Jesus says here “you are my friends” and “I have called you friends” and He never explicitly says “I am your friend,” but He really doesn’t have to, because friendship is a reciprocal relationship. If you are my friend, then I am your friend.
- There are other relationships that are not reciprocal, obviously—if I am your brother, you may not also be my brother, you may be my sister—if I am your son, you cannot also be my son, you must be my parent—if you are my employer, then I am your employee—these are not reciprocal relationships like friendship is.
- If I say that you are my friend, and I consider myself to be your friend, but you disagree, then I’m really not your friend and you’re not really my friend, because friendship not only CAN BE reciprocal—it MUST be reciprocal—if I think I’m your friend and you don’t then that friendship relationship is broken and artificial—because friendship is reciprocal—it goes both ways.
- And so when Jesus says to His disciples that they are His friends—and not strangers, not servants, not slaves, not even JUST disciples—they are His friends, then He is saying that He is also THEIR friend—and ours.
- And let’s just stop for a moment to consider the implication of that statement, particularly here in John’s gospel—now more than any other gospel, John is clear about

the divinity of Jesus—he starts his gospel with it—who is Jesus? John tells us that He is the eternal Word of the Father, the second person of the trinity, the one who was in the beginning with God and who WAS God, and through whom all things were made and without whom nothing was made—the Word that became flesh and lived among us—

- Make no mistake, this Jesus who says “you are my friends and I am your friend” is none other than Almighty God --none other than the one who turned water into wine, who made the blind to see, who calms the storm, who even raised the dead—and He says “I am your friend and you are my friend.”
- And this reminds us that while friendship is a reciprocal relationship, it need not be an equal relationship—you can be friends with your boss at work, but they’re still your boss—you can be friends with your children and they’re still your children—and we can be friends with Jesus and yet He’s still God incarnate, the Everlasting one, above whom there is no other.
- Can you imagine? The privilege of friendship with God Almighty?
- I have a friend, let’s call him Sam--and I think probably everybody knows somebody like this, but he’s that person that you can call whenever you need something—if you have a problem and don’t know who to call—then you can call Sam—and it doesn’t matter what you need—you might call Sam and say “Hey Sam, a tree fell in my backyard last night and I need somebody to cut it and remove it” or you might say “Hey Sam, I need new brakes on my car,” or “Hey Sam I need a haircut”—it doesn’t matter what you need or what your problem is, Sam will say, “Well I can’t help you myself but I have a friend who can”—and he knows somebody who does tree removal or who is an honest mechanic or a good barber” and sure enough, he does—

- And it occurs to me that when Jesus calls his followers, his disciples, his friends, He puts each of us in a position like Sam—in a position where we can say to those we come into contact with who are hurting, who are searching for answers, who need healing, whose hearts have been broken, whose lives are in need of repair, and we can say to them, “Well I can’t help you myself, but I have a friend who can”—what a friend we have in Jesus—all our sins and griefs to bear—what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer—
- Jesus tells his disciples again in our scripture this week, “the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name”
- And Jesus also tells his disciples “I don’t call you servants because a servant doesn’t know what the Master is doing—I call you friends because I’ve made everything known to you.” Friends talk to each other—have you ever been going through something, maybe a hard time, and your friend finds out about it and says “why didn’t you tell me about it? I thought we were friends”—or maybe something good happened to you—who are you gonna tell?—you’re gonna tell your friends—maybe you have a new idea or a new job or a new relationship—you’ll tell your friends—and so Jesus says not only “ask for what you need—tell the Father about it”—but he also says “I’ve made everything known to you”—now the disciples didn’t understand everything that Jesus made known to them—and you won’t either—but in time they remembered what He had said and done, and they understood, and you will too—because Jesus calls us His friends.
- Jesus concludes this passage of scripture not only by reminding his disciples one more time that he is commanding them to love one another—with that *agape* love that He models for them by laying down His life for them—but Jesus also tells his disciples in

verse 16 that He has chosen them for a purpose—Jesus says “I appointed you to bear fruit—fruit that will last”

- And so we have circled back to the figure of speech that Jesus used last Sunday when He spoke of the vine and the branches and bearing fruit—when He said that branches that bear no fruit would be removed and branches that bear fruit would be pruned so that they bear more fruit—and we mentioned last Sunday that the fruit that branches of a vine bear is not to feed themselves, but to feed others—branches don’t eat their own fruit—their nourishment comes from the vine and they produce fruit for the nourishment and sustenance of others
- But in verse 16 Jesus adds a new phrase when He mentions bearing fruit—He says that He has appointed the disciples to bear “fruit that will last.”
- And as I began to think and to pray about what “fruit that will last” could mean—and how that figure of speech should be interpreted, one of the first things I did was to look to the original Greek—and when I did I found that “fruit that will last” can also mean “fruit that will remain” or “fruit that will stay”—or perhaps most appropriate of all it can be translated “fruit that will abide” because the word that John uses there is *menó*—abide--we talked about that word last week—Jesus uses it again and again in verses 4 through 7-- Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me-- Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit-- Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers--- If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you--- and then we saw that Jesus uses it again in this week’s scripture when He tells the disciples to abide in His agape—*menó*—to abide—Jesus says “I have appointed you to bear fruit that will abide.”

- And as I thought about that idea, I thought about the way that sometimes Morrison's grocery store, or local restaurants or individuals will donate fresh produce—fruit and veg-- to our Hospitality ministry—and Pastor Tasha has to figure out ways to use it or to preserve it—to make it last so that it doesn't go to waste—so that it can be eaten. And there are lots of ways that she does that—you can freeze things, or dehydrate them, or can them—you can make fruit into jams and jellies—there are many ways to make fruit last so that it can be eaten later.
- But as I kept pondering this figure of speech— I just wasn't sure how it applied to what we as disciples of Jesus are called to do when we are "appointed to bear fruit that will abide." I thought about how the fruit that is produced by the vine isn't for the nourishment of the vine, but for the nourishment of others, and so I thought, "well, we want to make sure our fruit doesn't spoil or rot," but I just felt like I was missing something.
- And one morning I woke up with a thought in my mind and that thought was this—I had been looking at fruit as a thing to be consumed—I had been looking from the perspective of the consumer—of the one who eats it—and not from the perspective of the vine and the branches—from the perspective of the plant—because a plant—a vine—doesn't produce fruit just so that some animal or people can eat it—no, the point of bearing fruit is the fact that fruit has seeds in it---that's what fruit is, a carrier for the seed--an animal or a person eats the fruit and may distribute the seeds—in science we call that a "vector"—but the REASON for the fruit isn't the eating, it's the SEED—the eating is a fringe benefit—it's the way that the seed gets planted and new growth and new fruit happens—

- And if you really want to make sure that fruit abides, that it remains, that it lasts—the best way to do that is to plant the seed and let it grow
- And suddenly the idea of being “appointed to bear fruit that abides” made a lot more sense to me.
- When we bear fruit that carries the seed of the gospel it will grow, it will abide, in ways we cannot predict, in ways we may never even be aware of, in ways beyond what we can even imagine.
- We, as disciples of Christ, are called to love one another, to lay down our very lives for each other as Jesus laid down His life for us, to be pruned and shaped and formed by the Father and to bear fruit that will abide—and we are not strangers nor slaves nor servants, but we are friends whose joy is made complete when we do what He commands and abide in the love of Jesus.
- Have a great week, remember that Jesus is your friend--bear fruit that abides each and every day, in all that you say and all that you do, and we'll see you again real soon.