

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia
Confirmation Sunday
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“So, Now We Are Friends?”

John 15:12-17

George C. Anderson

Our passage is from the last conversation Jesus has with his disciples. He is preparing them for when he will no longer be with them, telling them that he will soon be arrested. What I read is a critical part of what he says, because he wants them to hear what he needs from them.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

I have another one of those stories I’ve told from this pulpit before, but it’s worth telling again.

When I was a student at Union Presbyterian Seminary, I had a theology professor named John Leith. He was one of my favorites— exactly the professor I needed to give me a solid foundation for studying theology the rest of my life. But he was also gruff. He wanted to be clear about the relationship he would have with us:

- He was there to teach.



- We were there to learn.

So, when we first level students came together for the first day of our *Introduction to Theology* class, after calling the roll, he said, “I am Dr. John Leith. My friends call me ‘John.’”

Then he paused, looked around the room, and said, “I don’t see any friends here, so you will call me Dr. Leith.”

Believe me, we were fine with that. With his international reputation and his intimidating presence, I could not imagine calling him “John.”

When I graduated and began serving congregations, I stayed in touch with Dr. Leith. I would visit him when I was in Richmond. When he moved into a nursing facility, I would call him every month or so. His body was failing, but his mind was sharp.

He would pick up and I would say. “This is George Anderson. Dr. Leith, how are you doing?”

He always answered honestly. He would say a bit about the declining state of his health and sometimes add something like, “Growing old isn’t for sissies.” But then, quickly, he would pivot. He’d ask about me and my church. Then he would want to talk about the seminary, and the country, and the world— always venting his curmudgeonly complaints. Still, even as his life was narrowing, he cared about the future.

Then one day, I called and said, “This is George Anderson. Dr. Leith, how are you doing?”

This time, before answering, he said, “George, I’d like you to call me John.”

Oh. So *now* we’re friends.

This was not a sentimental moment on his part, but I was touched. He was telling me that our relationship had changed... not because I earned a degree or had suddenly become his equal; but time, trust, and conversation had changed our relationship and, as far as he was concerned, I was now his friend.

I was touched but also unsettled. After all those years of respect, distance, and intimidation, I needed to think of him first as a friend, and not as a professor.

I knew it would take time to get used to calling him “John...,” and we didn’t have much time.

When Jesus says to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants—You are my friends,” this also is not a sentimental moment. This is a seismic moment.

They had been with Jesus for three years.

No, there is a better way of putting it.

They had *followed* Jesus for three years. They had walked dusty roads, eaten countless meals, listened to his teaching; been corrected by him, and confused him, disappointed him.

They had

watched him heal and forgive and confront injustice.

He had been their Rabbi, and they had been servants of his ministry... of his cause.



And then he tells them two shocking things.

First, he is going to be arrested and he is going to be killed.

Second, they are now his friends.

That is a terrifying combination.

- “You are about to die, and now you tell us we are your friends.”
- “Now, when powerful people are working to arrest you, you want us to be your closest allies?”

Yes.

Precisely because Jesus is going where they cannot follow anymore, he needs them to be friends. He is not looking for a hug. He’s looking for a promise. This is about responsibility.

To be his friends means passing on his message and carrying on his work. It means:

- Teaching the Gospel as he taught it.
- Going where he went.
- Standing with those he stood with.
- Refusing to judge when others condemn.
- Loving when it costs something.
- Living in ways that honor his name rather than embarrass it.

We just entered the year 2026. We are not shocked these days by thinking of Jesus as our friend. We talk about it. We sing about it—“What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” We pray to Jesus as a friend. We ask him to

- walk with us,
- talk with us,
- understand us,
- strengthen us.

We want Jesus to

- be there for us when we are sick or in trouble,
- help us when we are distressed,
- understand us when no one else does.

What *can be* shocking today is when we realize that Jesus wants us to be *his* friend. The kind of friend who speaks for him, acts on his behalf, and bears his love into the world even when it is uncomfortable, inconvenient, or risky. It means going to the places he went, welcoming the people



he welcomed. He means not embarrassing his reputation by speaking and acting in selfish, cruel, unkind, or prejudicial ways and then pretending that this is what Jesus would do.

Confirmands, I want you to think about that, because Jesus is asking you to be his friends. During your examination, I invited you to call me “George”—a symbolic way to mark your becoming adult members of the church.

What I am saying to you is that Jesus is also inviting you to a deeper relationship. He wants you to be his friends.

That is what Confirmation is.

Not graduation.

Not arrival.

But agreeing to this relationship with Jesus.

That’s a **big ask**. To be friends of Jesus means a lot of things, including being friends with his friends.

- Not just the people who think like us.
- Not just the people who agree with us.
- Not just the people who make life easy or comfortable.

But the ones who are hurting, overlooked, misunderstood, and pushed aside.

- The ones
 - who test our patience.
 - who stretch our compassion.
 - who remind us that genuine love is rarely simple or easy.

To be Jesus’ friend is to let your life be shaped by his priorities.

- It means caring when it would be easier not to.
- Forgiving when it would be more satisfying to stay angry.
- Speaking honestly when silence would protect you.
- Standing for goodness when it costs you something.

That *is* a **big ask**.

It is also a gift though. Because Jesus is not asking us into a relationship of burden, but into a relationship of meaning- of love you share with each other.

- He is not handing us a rulebook; he is offering us a life that matters.
- He is trusting us with his heart for the world.

Did you hear that?

He is trusting *us*



with *his* heart
for *the world*.

He is saying, *I believe you can carry my love when I am not physically present.*

That is astonishing.

- To be called a friend by Jesus is to be trusted.
- It is to be invited into God's own work of healing and hope.
- It is to discover that your life, ordinary as it may feel, can be a vessel of grace.

For you confirmands, this is not about having all the answers. It is about saying “Yes” to an invitation to a relationship.

Friendship with Christ will challenge you.

But it will also steady you, guide you, support you. It will ask more of you than you expect.

But it will give you more than you can imagine:

- a purpose larger than yourself,
- a love that does not abandon you,
- and a place in a story that God is still writing.

So yes, **it is a big ask**, but it is also a holy honor.

Benediction:

Friends,
as you go from this place, remember whose friend you are.
You are friends of Jesus Christ—
called not only to receive his love,
but to carry it into a hurting world.
Go with courage to love when it is costly,
with humility to listen when it is hard,
and with grace to forgive when it would be easier not to.
May the love of God who chose you,
the friendship of Christ who trusts you,
and the power of the Holy Spirit who goes before you
strengthen you and guide you, now and always.
Amen.

