At Cross Purposes
John 15:12-17; Mark 8:27-34

John 15:14  You are my friends if you do what I command you.

You won’t know this man, but, just in case, I’ll call him John. John came home recently and told his wife that he had invited Jason, his young friend at work, for dinner that evening.

His wife was not pleased. “We’re having yesterday’s left-overs and I don’t think there’s even enough food for an extra person. Look at the mess in the family room and I hope you haven’t forgotten you’re taking Tim to basketball tonight. Worst of all, my hair’s a mess; I haven’t time to fix it now and I hate for people to see me like this. What were you thinking?”

“Well, Jason’s a good friend,” he replied. “He’s thinking of getting married and I wanted him to see what marriage is like.” !!

That’s what friends are for, right? Friends look out for one another, support one another, take care of one another.

That was certainly the premise behind the popular TV series, Friends. In 236 episodes over a 10 year run on NBC, and now endlessly recycled on some cable channel, somewhere, six young people, living in New York, found companionship, encouragement and support that helped them handle the pressures of life. Their friendship was summed up in the theme song, “I’ll be there for you.” Many people see things that way: she’s always ‘there for me’ is the definition of a great friend.

The trouble is, these days people want—and it seems many people only want—friends who will agree with them, will affirm them and take an interest in them, without asking questions or making demands.

Friends are to serve as echo chambers for our opinions, goals and wants

There are sociologists, however, who are raising concerns that too much of this is bad: excessive self-affirmation is not good for us. They talk about an age of “expressive individualism,” or as David Brooks described it, the age of “the Big Me.” We are living in, Brooks says, “a culture that encourage[s] people to see themselves as the center of the universe.”

Barbara Brown Taylor recognizes the limitations of echo chamber friendship. The limitation is its one-sidedness, and that is not a basis for healthy living. Taylor warns us that,

> At a deeper level, most of us need someone to help us forget ourselves, a little or a lot. The great wisdom traditions of the world all recognize that the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self-absorbed.

And suddenly we are at the heart of the issue between Jesus and Peter in Mark 8, even if Peter didn’t intend it.

Peter wanted to affirm Jesus, support him, even protect him, but he wanted to do this by affirming the status quo and echoing his own perspective. And, to be fair to Peter, Peter’s

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perspective was everybody’s perspective: the idea that the Messiah would end up on a Roman cross was unthinkable to the point of being impossible. Peter couldn’t even contemplate that happening to his friend.

Fortunately for Peter and for us, Jesus did not need the affirmation of the status quo, nor the endorsement of the majority. Fortunately Jesus was secure in his calling as Messiah and committed to the way of the cross. He knew that Peter was echoing the culture and avoiding the unwelcome challenge: “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

And the divine thing was the cross, precisely as the expression of a love that was unprecedented, a friendship that is divine: “There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

And suddenly Peter discovered that he and Jesus were at cross purposes. Mark’s language is intense. Peter began to rebuke Jesus … Jesus rebuked Peter. On Peter’s side sensible self-preservation and the wisdom of the world; on Jesus’s side, self-sacrifice and the wisdom of God. And through the wisdom of God, and only thus—the blessing of God.

Peter would have found that unthinkable enough as applied to his friend Jesus, but worse was to follow (from his worldly perspective.) Jesus goes on immediately to say: You are my friends if you do what I command you… He expects us to follow—that is to copy him!

And that is hard. If I offended anyone today by praying for terrorists in the wake of the 9/11 anniversary, let me simply say, “I’m with you. I agree.” I find it hard and I too shudder at the enormities they commit and the death and devastation they deal in. But I led you in that prayer because Jesus told me to, Jesus told us to.

There’s a whole section of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus makes it clear just how seriously he is at cross purposes with the world. The part I’m referring to is found in Matthew 5:43 and 44. First he reminds us of the way of the world: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ Then Jesus counters with his way, “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Now loving them, in the biblical sense, doesn’t mean liking them, nor approving of their actions. Loving them means wanting the best for them, wanting them rescued from lives that are literally hell-bent on destruction, and wanting that because we know they too are children of God and their actions pain God and stand in deadly opposition to God’s purposes for human life.

I read a book review last week that bears on this. The book will be published in America next month and is titled, Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence and was written by the former chief rabbi in Britain, Jonathan Sacks. The review begins,

The Western world is less and less capable of offering any coherent spiritual alternative to the grim certainties of the terrorist groups which commit atrocities in the name of religion.

And continues,

[Sacks] says the West is losing the distinctive values that used to attract outsiders: ideals like human dignity and public service, which in his view are at least subliminally religious. It has replaced them with the market, consumerism and relativism, a world
that accepts “whatever works for you.” This creates a vacuum in which brute force backed by the certainty of a cohesive group can be terrifyingly effective.  

Now, we live in a world that needs justice: the innocent and the vulnerable need protection. The political and military responses are necessary. But they are limited: they may contain, but will not convince, a committed heart. Only prayer will do that, which is why Jesus told us to pray for enemies.

Jesus wants his followers to be friends in the way he befriended us—giving himself to make us his; developing us to make us more; growing us in faith and trust and ever deeper appreciation of the riches he embodies so that we may discover richer possibilities of what we and our world may become in him and with him. This applies across all areas of our lives.

It’s a question of Christian character. David Brooks begins his new book, to which I alluded earlier, with the contrast between what he calls ‘resume virtues’ and ‘eulogy virtues.’ The resume virtues are the achievements that service our careers and build our standing in the world. The eulogy virtues are detailed at our funeral and describe the core of our being, whether we are kind, brave, honest and faithful.

You meet eulogy virtues in the kinds of people who ...

... are not blown off course by storms. They don’t crumble in adversity...

They radiate a sort of moral joy. They answer softly when challenged harshly. They are silent when unfairly abused. They are dignified when others try to humiliate them, restrained when others try to provoke them. But they get things done. They perform acts of sacrificial service with the same modest everyday spirit they would display if they were just getting the groceries. They are not thinking about what impressive work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all. They just seem delighted by the flawed people around them. They just recognize what needs doing and they do it.

Interestingly, that paragraph is so shot through with Christian resonance that many wonder if Brooks is on a journey from being a secular Jew to someone close to Christianity—he was even interviewed by Christianity Today! Anyway, his description is a good echo of the teaching of Jesus.

So here’s the challenge. Take your pulse this week when something happens that you don’t like—someone’s rude, a driver cuts you off or drives Gulf of Mexico Drive at 25mph, someone cheats you: whatever. How do you respond? Do you hit back in the way of the world? Or do you reach for the Christian way even if—no, especially if—it is at cross purposes to what you’d like to do?

1 John 15:13.
2 “Bloodied Brothers” Books and Arts, in The Economist September 5, 2015, 82.
3 Brooks, Kindle location 63.