



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 I Have Called You Friends
(*Friendship*, pp. 20-27)
- 📖 Depicting Christ's Friends
(*Friendship*, pp. 48-51)
- 📖 Near the Cross of Jesus
(*Friendship*, pp. 52-55)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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The Beloved Disciple

The Gospel of John contrasts the fates of Peter and the beloved disciple. For Peter, as for Jesus, the full extent of love meant the laying down of one's life. For the beloved disciple, the full extent of that love meant testifying with his whole life to the love of God in Jesus. Both ways of loving are acts of faithfulness; both make one Jesus' friend.

Prayer

Lord, we call you our friend, but most of the time we are incapable of understanding what that means. It's too complex to fathom that you — our creator and the one who governs the world — want to have an intimate relationship with us. It's too absurd to believe that you — the one whom we cannot see — are our most loyal and faithful companion.

Continue to be with us, Lord. Continue calling us to a faithful relationship with you and the world you created. Amen.

Scripture Reading: John 21:1-25

Responsive Reading: 1 John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — **this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us —**

we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us;

and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Reflection

Who was "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20; cf. 19:16; 20:2; and 21:7)? Tradition says he authored the Gospel and Letters of John and is the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee. But if this is so, why did he identify himself in such an indirect way? It remains an intriguing mystery, for the beloved disciple is mentioned in only in a few stories in the Fourth Gospel. But what wonderful and memorable stories they are:

- ▶ "He was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper" (21:20; cf. 13:23). Heidi Hornik reminds us how artists over the centuries have imagined the scene: John is "close to Christ at the table, usually on his left, and...[sleeping] with his head on the table." In the two works she surveys, "Christ embraces or lays his left hand over the shoulder and back of the sleeping disciple. Clearly this is a position of intimacy and caring between friends. John is also depicted as unbearded, and younger and more effeminate than the other apostles."
- ▶ "And from that hour the disciple took [Jesus' mother] into his own home" (21:27). On the cross, Jesus commends Mary and the beloved disciple into one another's care. "Even as Jesus is suffering in order to draw all humanity to God — he was 'lifted up,' John



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says, so that 'whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:14-15; cf. 8:28, 12:32, 34) — Jesus pauses to care for his mother and his best friend's future life together on earth," notes Hornik. "In this vignette, God's universal love is revealed to be utterly specific and concrete."

- "The rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die" (21:23). Jesus says that Peter will live out Jesus' love by dying a martyr's death. But the beloved disciple will not be martyred; instead he will live to be a very old man. "He will not love in the same way that Peter loved, but will enact Jesus' love in another way — by telling the stories on which this Gospel is based (21:24; see also 19:35). Both of these disciples are held up to the Gospel reader as true disciples, yet their enactments of love follow two completely different paths."

The stories about the disciple whom Jesus loved, and the stories he continued to tell about his friend Jesus, remind us "that the love that enabled Jesus to lay down his life for his friends is not unique to him," Gail O'Day writes. "This love can be replicated and embodied over and over again by his followers. To keep Jesus' commandment is to enact his love in our own lives."

Study Questions

1. How does the trajectory of the beloved disciple's life express his friendship with Jesus?
2. Discuss Gail O'Day's view: "To speak as openly to others as Jesus did...is different from what we normally mean when we 'tell people what they need to hear' or 'speak one's mind.' Those instances of plain speaking are the opposite of friendship, because they are based on a master/servant or teacher/student model — the speaker positions himself or herself over against the listener."
3. "Christ did not lay down his life for us as enemies so that we should remain enemies," Thomas Aquinas wrote, "but so that he could make us friends." How do Jesus' life and death enable us to be friends with God and one another?
4. What do we learn about the beloved disciple from the iconographic tradition of Christian art?
5. In relation to the Flemish sculpture *The Last Supper* (cover), discuss Gail O'Day's observation: "Jesus did not exclude Judas from the circle of his love, but loved him in the same ways that he loved all of his other followers. What counts most is the embodiment of God's love in the world, not the character of those who receive this love."

Departing Hymn: "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me"

I'm gonna live so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna live so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna work so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna work so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna pray so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna pray so God can use me any time and anywhere.

African-American Spiritual
Tune: I'M GONNA LIVE

The Beloved Disciple

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the stories in the Gospel of John about the disciple whom Jesus loved.
2. To examine how the beloved disciple's life and ministry is a faithful response of friendship with Jesus.
3. To consider how Jesus' friendship inspires and shapes our discipleship and love for each other.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Friendship (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me" locate the tune I'M GONNA LIVE in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

"To speak of friendship with God can sound so cozy and consoling, as if we are all snuggling up to God; however, there is no riskier vulnerability than to live in friendship with God, because every friendship changes us, because friends have expectations of each other, and because friends are said to be committed to the same things," Paul Wadell has written. "Any friend of God is called to faithfully embody the ways of God in the world, even to the point of suffering on account of them. There may be grace and glory in being a friend of God, but there is also clearly a cost" (Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship*, 10).

This warning is important to keep in mind as we consider how the Gospel of John portrays our discipleship as friendship with God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer printed in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 21:1-25 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This study guide—like the previous one, "I Have Called You Friends"—explores Jesus' friendship with his disciples as portrayed in the Gospel of John. That previous study focused on Jesus' definition of love and friendship in John 15:12-15, where he commands us to love one another "as I have loved you." Here the focus is on our response—our discipleship of Jesus and love for one another—as friendship with Jesus.

When Jesus defines his love for the disciples, he highlights two features of the ancient ideal of friendship: the gift of one's life for one's friend and the use of frank and open speech. He commands his followers to love one another in this way. The ministry of "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is a model for our faithful response of friendship with Jesus. This disciple's life is devoted to sharing with others all that the Father has revealed to him about the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Study Questions

1. The beloved disciple enacts Jesus' love in several ways. Scripture says that this disciple both cares for Jesus' friend and mother, Mary, after his death (John 21:27) and tells the stories on which the Gospel of John is based (21:24; see also 19:35). If, as Church tradition says, this disciple is the person who wrote the Gospel and Letters of John, then he became a leader of the Christian community (e.g., 1 John 1:1-4). Discuss how the beloved disciple gives his life for his friends, and speaks to them with frank and open speech. Consider how his faithful discipleship can be a model for our response of friendship with Jesus.
2. "We have been changed by Jesus' honest and plain speaking, and this transformation lies at the heart of Christian friendship," O'Day writes. She believes that Jesus replaces our tendency to "tell people what they need to hear" with a friendship model: "Both speaker and listener are transformed by the plain speaking of friendship, because in holding nothing back, the speaker acts in the intimacy and trust of transformative love. The speaker risks herself in the speaking; the listener risks himself in the hearing." Consider how this model might reshape how we interact with strangers, how we provide a faithful witness to the gospel, and how we care for others who are in need.
3. Aquinas is saying that Jesus' life and death call us into relationship with God and enable us to live as friends with God and one another. On the one hand, Jesus is *the winsome model for our self-giving friendship with one another*. His washing the disciples' feet, for instance, is a "sacrament of friendship" in which "Jesus offers himself completely to his disciples, assuming the social role of servant, in order to give a tangible shape to his love," O'Day writes. "Jesus has transformed the community through his love, so that they can continue his acts of love. Love and service are defined by what Jesus has done, and what Jesus has done is share himself completely with the disciples through the symbolic act of foot washing." On the other hand, Jesus' openness and frank speaking *creates space for us to live in intimacy with God*. Through Jesus' plain speaking, God acknowledges us as friends.
4. Invite members to study the four works of art in the *Friendship* issue: the Flemish sculpture *The Last Supper* (cover and p. 48), Ghirlandaio's *The Last Supper* (p. 50), Monaco's *The Crucified Christ between the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist* (p. 52), and Terbrugghen's *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John* (p. 54). In the iconographic tradition of the beloved disciple—the ways in which he has been portrayed in art—we see the how Christians over the centuries have interpreted the stories in John's Gospel. He is identified with the Apostle John, one of the sons of Zebedee. Usually he is prominently positioned on Jesus' left side (though he is not as significant as either Mary or Peter, who are placed on Jesus' right). He is portrayed as the youngest disciple (and the one without a beard), probably because of the tradition that he would not die before Jesus' return in glory.
5. The Flemish sculpture *The Last Supper* positions the disciples all around a circular table, but it places Judas (the one who holds a money bag in his hidden hand and stands up from his stool which is tipping precariously) on the viewer's side. Judas and Jesus are singled out by their dress—they are wearing first-century robes while the other figures are in sixteenth-century clerical garb. Jesus has just told his friends that "one of you will betray me" (John 13:21b) and most of them are reacting with questions. Peter, however, signals that he understands who the betrayer is. Yet at this very moment Jesus offers Judas the bread—a symbol of his sacrificed life. What must Peter be thinking?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.