

## Friends of Jesus

John 15:12-17

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

May 9, 2021

Before we deal with our text, a few words about the page one above the fold headline in the yesterday's Winston-Salem Journal: "WFU (Wake Forest University) renames building with slavery ties."

Like many universities – and municipalities – across the South, Wake Forest is coming to terms with its history, especially its history with regard to slavery and the Civil War. I know that Baylor is dealing with same issue. What makes Wake Forest's decision striking is not simply that it decided to change the name of a building with "slave ties;" other schools are doing that. It is what the university is changing the name of the building to that is pretty remarkable.

Wingate Hall is an academic building that is attached to the backside of Wait Chapel, the university auditorium that is named after Samuel Wait, who founded the school in 1835. Wingate Hall houses the department of religion as well as the Wake Forest University Divinity School. It was my home for 23 years until I retired.

Washington Manly Wingate was president before and after the Civil War, the school being closed during the war because many students and faculty served in the Confederate army. Like each of his predecessors, Wingate was a slaveowner. Thus, his name will disappear from the building to which it has been attached for 65 years.

The new name for the building will be – May 7, 1855, which must rank as one of the most unusual names for an academic building anywhere. Why May 7, 1855? Because on that date Wake Forest College sold 16 slaves for \$10,718 to set up the school's endowment fund, which today totals \$1.3 billion. Washington Manly Wingate was president when that transaction took place. The chairman of the board of trustees was – Samuel Wait, in whose honor the university chapel is named. No decision yet about renaming Wait Chapel.

By giving the building this unusual name, the university's ties with slavery will be preserved. Every time a first-year student looks at his or her class schedule and says, "There must be a mistake. It says my religion class will meet in May 7, 1855," someone will have to explain.

The decision of Wake Forest puts pressure on a Baptist school near Charlotte – Wingate University.

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On the last two Sundays we have considered images that Jesus used when talking with his disciples shortly before his death. When speaking of his protective relationship with his followers, he said he was the shepherd and they were the sheep. When talking about the symbiotic relationship between him and his disciples, he said that he was the vine, and they were the branches; he invited them to make him their spiritual home just as he made his home in them.

This morning we consider another image, one that is familiar but one that, when we think about it, might make us a bit uncomfortable, surprisingly so. The image is friend.

What could be more familiar?

*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.*

Charles Scriven wrote the poem in the mid-nineteenth century -- it was set to music a decade later -- for his mom who was back home, lonely in Ireland, while he was preaching in Canada.

*Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged (Mom); take it to the Lord in prayer.*

“What a friend we have in Jesus” became and remains one of the most loved hymns of all times, because it touches people at their deepest needs and offers Jesus as their friend, one who “knows our every weakness.” When we have “trials and temptations,” when our friends “despise, forsake” us, we can “take it to the Lord in prayer.”

Generations of Christians have found comfort in the image of Jesus as their friend. I certainly have no intention of denigrating that in any way.

But here’s the thing. In our text, Jesus didn’t say that he was *our* friend; he said we are *his* friends. Does that make a difference? Yes, it makes a big difference.

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The author of John’s Gospel pictures Jesus talking with his closest disciples one last time. The conversation consumes four entire chapters (14-17). At its conclusion, the narrative resumes: “*After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.*” Then Judas arrived and Jesus was arrested.

Jesus has less than 24 hours to live. He knows it. Surely, his disciples must know it too. Among the last words that they hear from his lips are, “*I do not call you servants any longer . . . I have called you friends.*”

With those words, which must have been emotionally powerful under the circumstances, Jesus changed the nature of their relationship from a master/servant or perhaps a master teacher or rabbi/student – which is to say, a superior/inferior relationship -- to a relationship between friends, a relationship of mutuality.

For three years he had taught them, walking the dusty roads of Galilee, over meals, hanging out, telling stories. He had known all along that it would come to this, that he would leave them – it was gradually dawning on them -- and that he had to prepare them to carry on without him.

“*I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father,*” he said. In other words, “I have taught you everything I know. There is nothing left to tell you. For three years I have been your teacher, your leader. You have called me Rabbi and Lord. Now the teaching is over. You aren’t my students anymore. You’re my friends.”

I wonder how the disciples felt when Jesus told them he was going to call them friends. Did they feel the way I felt when Dr. Christian, my dissertation adviser, stepped out of the conference room in Tidwell and told me that the faculty had approved my dissertation, that I was going to receive a Ph.D. from Baylor University, and that he was proud to be the first to address me as his colleague. “I no longer call you my student. I call you my colleague.” I smiled proudly, my chest expanded, I shook his hand, and I

thought, “There is no way you and I are ever going to be colleagues. You are and will always be my Professor. And don’t tell me I can call you Wally now, because that ain’t gonna happen – ever.” It never did happen.

Dr. Summers, head of the department, whose textbook on the Revelation I used in seminary, told me I could call him Ray. And Mrs. Summers Jester. Ray and Jester. Really?

I wonder if the disciples felt that way. I can hear them talking to one another after Jesus left the room. “I don’t know, man, I’m kinda comfortable with ‘Lord.’ Any of you guys on a first name basis? Anybody call him ‘Jesus’? Me neither. ‘Master,’ yeah. ‘Friend’? I don’t think so.”

It is more comfortable, isn’t it, keeping a suitable distance between ourselves and Jesus? Why do you think that is?

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We might find a clue in a poem that Carl Wendell Hines, Jr. wrote after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Imagine as you hear his words about MLK that he is writing about Jesus.

*Now that he is safely dead,  
Let us praise him  
Build monuments to his glory.  
Sing Hosannas to his name.*

*Dead men make such convenient heroes.  
For they cannot rise to challenge the images  
That we might fashion from their lives.  
It is easier to build monuments  
Than to build a better world.*

*So now that he is safely dead,  
We, with eased consciences will  
Teach our children that he was a great man,  
Knowing that the cause for which he  
Lived is still a cause  
And the dream for which he died is still a dream.  
A dead man’s dream.*

To put someone on a pedestal literally or figuratively can be a way of honoring them; it can also be a way of rendering them irrelevant, getting them out of the way.

Remember the time an adoring but misguided crowd wanted to make Jesus a king, and he told, in essence, “No, no. You can’t get rid of me that easily”?

That is what we are tempted to do with Jesus, now that he is “safely dead” – honor him with monuments made of words, not of stone.

We gladly sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus,” celebrating what our friend can do for us. But friendship goes both ways. What does it mean for us to honor our friend?

Does it not mean to live the life he would have lived if he had lived past 33? To fulfill the promise of scripture: “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*”?

Does it not mean to see him everywhere we look, in everyone we meet? The stranger, those who wander across and within borders, homeless (not just shelter-less) in the world; those who are hungry in a world of plenty; those who are oppressed by the powers of fear, prejudice, greed, and violence; those who have been unjustly accused and convicted as well as those who have been justly accused and convicted?

Does it not mean to join the struggle against all that constricts and distorts the divine image in all people; to ease the suffering of those possessed by the demon of mental illness; to see him, as Mother Teresa said, “in the distressing disguise of the poor”? (In that disguise there is no difference between the deserving and the undeserving poor.)

Does it not mean to see him in the faces of everyone we meet and to serve him by serving those in whom we have seen him?

Isn't that what friends are for? Amen.