

Scripture: John 15:12-15  
 The greatest American of all Time  
 Delivered on August 23, 2009

True story. In an issue of Harper's Magazine, published several years ago, it was reported that in a survey which asked Americans to name the greatest American of all time, the thirteenth ranking went to... **Jesus**—a ranking he shares with former president Clinton!

Let's set the record straight. Jesus was NOT an American. He didn't go to football games, he never ate a hotdog, and he never sang the Star Spangled Banner. In fact, Jesus didn't sing or speak **any** English. He spoke Aramaic. This is not a half-truth made up by some white tower theologian. We have proof. In our New Testament, which was originally written in Greek--there remain some Aramaic expressions spoken by Jesus, which have come down to us without translation. So for example, when Jesus heals Jairus' daughter—a daughter who was thought to be dead, the Bible records Jesus saying, "Talitha Cum"—remember that line? It's Aramaic for Little Girl get up. Again, when Jesus is on the cross, dying, the Bible has it that Jesus says, "Eloi, Eloi, Lema sabachthani?" which is Aramaic for "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

We can be pretty sure that Jesus also knew Hebrew which is very similar to Aramaic. The alphabet is the same, a lot of the words are the same. It wouldn't have been difficult for Jesus to pick up Hebrew. Temple rabbis and priests read from Hebrew texts, as they still do today. And they spoke Hebrew to each other when they were talking about things religious. In Luke 4, we read that Jesus went to the temple, and when the time came, he opened the Hebrew scroll to Isaiah and read the text. That's the proof we have that Jesus read Hebrew. The Bible tells us that Jesus talked about scripture with the learned men of his day—again, the language he spoke to them was probably Hebrew.

Now, there's still another language with which Jesus **might** have been familiar. It is far less certain, but it is **possible** that Jesus knew Greek, which is way different than either Hebrew or Aramaic. Perhaps Jesus didn't read Greek, but he might have acquired a working vocabulary of the language. Greek was the language of the occupying Roman forces in Judah. We know, too, that the city of Sepphoris, which has recently been uncovered by archeologists, was a Roman city. Sepphoris was only a short three mile, one hour walk from Jesus' hometown, Nazareth. This is just speculation, but since Jesus and his dad were carpenters, they might have found work in Sepphoris. In our Bibles, we read that Jesus had conversations with a Centurion, and toward the end of his life, with Pontius Pilate. Did the Centurion and Pontius Pilate know Aramaic? Were there translators present? Or isn't it more likely that Jesus spoke to these folks in their native tongue?

Ok, with that background, we're ready to deal with our text for today. I want to talk about the first part of our scripture reading which is this, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you... You are my friends," and a little later on in the text, "I do not call you servants any longer, but I have called you friends."

Way back in my seminary days, I remember my Hebrew professor telling me that there is no word for “friend” in either the Aramaic or the Hebrew language. Isn’t that strange? Friend. It’s such an important, basic word, isn’t it? I mean, friend is almost as basic as hand or foot, or moma or dada, isn’t it? How could a language not have the word “friend?”

Years ago when I heard that in class, I thought to myself, “Surely my professor is wrong.” So, this week I did a little research on the word Friend in Hebrew (As far as I know there’s no such thing as an Ancient Aramaic lexicon, so for our purposes, we’ll just assume that as it is in Hebrew, so it is also for Aramaic.) It turns out my professor is right on. Yes, it is true. There is no word for Friend in Hebrew. That got me to wondering, of course, “Why not? What was wrong with those people?”

I believe I have an answer. My thinking is that back in Jesus’ day, when people didn’t travel so much, when you pretty much lived and died in the same area, everyone was related to everybody else. Back then, everyone was identified by their connections—a person was known as Abraham’s son, Joshua’s daughter-in-law, or Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. So, there was no pressing need for the word friend. And, I am also thinking that perhaps in that social milieu people were more than a little cautious of outsiders who were not related either biologically or by marriage—the same way it still is today in the US, particularly if you live in a small town or in the country.

As a for instance, last week I was talking to someone who has lived in Covesville her entire long and productive life. I suggested she might want to share some of her wonderful stories from the past with our church historian, Diane **Easley**. This lovely, white haired woman stood staring silently at me for a long several minutes. I just knew she was silently thumbing through all the files in her large mental file cabinet of families in Covesville: “Let’s see: Ames, Leake, Mehring, Napier, Shifflett.” Then she said, “Easley. Easley. That’s not a name from around here. No, I don’t know **that** name.” I noted an ever so slight tinge of suspicion in her voice when she said that—as if Diane worked for the FBI or the CIA or something. As with this woman, maybe so too with folks in Nazareth and in all the other little towns in villages around Galilee. There were **your** people—related by genes or marriage, and then there was everybody else.

But of course even the Aramaic and Hebrew speakers in Jesus’ day understood the **concept** of friend, even if there was no single word for it. When they needed to describe that special person who was unrelated by either blood or marriage and was not an enemy, they strung together several words to create the expression: “An Associate who is loved.” That’s kind of poetic don’t you think?

So, if you translate the Bible from the English through the Greek (in which the New Testament was written) and back into Hebrew (which is a close cousin to Aramaic), Jesus probably actually said, “I have called you Associates who are loved.”

Even better. In my research, I discovered that what is translated into English as “intimate friend,” in Hebrew (and presumably Aramaic, too) is actually, “An associate who is **as my soul**.” So, Jesus might have said to his disciples, “I have called you my associates who are as my very soul to me.” **That**, is **real** poetry. These friends on whom Jesus is counting to spread God’s holy word, who (except for Jesus’ brother, James) are not kin, but who have been gathered from in an around Galilee—these men who have been his traveling companions, his students-- these folks have become to Jesus as close as his closest family relations—to these twelve men, Jesus says, “I call you my associates, you who are as my very soul to me.”

What a novel idea!? Relationships based on something other than genes or marriage? Fortunately, it is this idea of Christian friendship that has been passed down to us and is at the very core of our faith. Think about that. If the church hadn’t been so inclusive, it would have had a very short life span indeed. As it is, Christians from Jesus’ day forward have come together in a community of associates who love each other, and maybe are as as close as each others’ very souls.

I have a colleague who has only been in ministry for four years. She is pastor of a small church, too. She told me, just last week, in fact: “You know, I learned a lot about theology when I was in seminary. I thought it was so important at the time. Now I realize that theology isn’t worth very much. The most important thing we learn as Christians is how to love other people who, in a different setting, we maybe wouldn’t choose to get to know at all.”

Another colleague of mine who is also the pastor of a small church in a small town. My colleague says, “Several folks in my church serve on the town council. I can always tell when the town council has been struggling with a contentious issue. There’s tension in the air on Sunday morning. These folks march into the sanctuary. They don’t sit in their normal pews (just like us, I guess they each have pews staked out for them). My friend says, “On those Sundays, they don’t sit in their normal pews. Instead, they physically distance themselves from each other during worship. There they sit with arms crossed and eyebrows scrunched. It’s really kind of funny, because of course, they still have to break bread and share wine together. Eventually the contentious issue blows over and they return to being friends.”

What ever language we speak, in whatever language we worship, whether we call ourselves “associates who are loved, associates who are as our very souls to us, or friends, the concept has been with us since the time of Jesus. . Friendship in community. May it continue to be so for you as for me in THIS community of faith. Amen.