

John 15 "Friends"

Saint Mark PC

May 16, 2021

I would like to take a moment and reflect back through our different life stages - though some of you are still at a very early life stage! Can you remember your very first best friend? Maybe that person is still your very best friend.

For those who get a little older, life takes us in different directions, and we can lose touch on a regular basis with our friends

But you know how it is with friends, even if you haven't seen them in ages, (maybe over the pandemic), you can just pick right up like you just saw them yesterday.

What is it that makes a best friend a best friend? It's hard to put into words, but it is because you share a unique, interactive, special relationship. You have shared memories. You laugh at things no one else understands. You can relate to how they are feeling or thinking about a particular subject.

They make your life better.

So what about thinking of God in Christ in those terms? When you talk about what Jesus Christ brought into the world, taught his followers, how our lives are

different and better because of his partnership with us, you could describe it in terms of being a friend.

Not only could we describe it that way, in fact, John in his gospel lays it out for us:

John 15 says clearly,

"no one has greater love than this - to lay down one's life for one's friends. And you are my friends."

This idea of God as friend was completely unheard of, even shocking to any of Jesus' followers.

He says then:

"You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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 I have heard from my Father. You are not servants, you are friends."

When we put this into context, take a step back and understand that Jesus was not here to start a new religion per se. In the gospels, he is often quite harsh on the religious leaders of his day. What he seemed to offer was "a way", and the early church was even called "the way."

What he offers is a chance for all people to see into the heart of God. As he said "that you may know him, the one and only true God, in Jesus Christ whom he sent."

And in this context, for the most part people had a far different conception of God - as a great cosmic powerful force, severe, judgmental, toying with people as a child toys with an anthill and a stick

When people thought of relating to God, it was often about fear and punishment. How can I keep God from getting angry? All manner of things were brought to bear, such as making sure to recite a certain word formula, knowing the right things to say. Or as the Pharisees did, write over 600 laws to make sure not to offend Yahweh on the sabbath..

A friend may hold you accountable. But a friend is not one who is going to abandon you unless you recite the magic formula. A friend sticks with you if you fall. The Bible even tells us that if you don't know how to pray, the Spirit does and the Spirit will intercede on our behalf. Isn't that a great God? That is a friend.

Think about friendship, what true friendship means. It is not based on a power dynamic or performance or control. It is not transactional. Jesus wants us to think not in terms of being servants, but being friends, partners in the Gospel, as Paul likes to say.

What would it mean to your life to say that God is friend, or even best friend?

I think it would mean several things:

One of the first things I think of when it comes to friendship is the word 'trust'.

Remember when we make a profession of faith, or we join a church, or when we are being baptized, we answer a question about Jesus Christ "Do you trust in him?" Do you?

That is not a trivial question. Friendship means trust. God has my back. God is accessible. God is for me.

Trust is an interesting concept. It is generally defined as a firm reliance on the integrity, ability,

truth or character of a person, or a thing, and it often goes hand in hand along with connotations of hope. Trust leads to being hopeful about the future.

Today, there is an erosion of trust everywhere. Its in our institutions, government, even churches. If you look at polls, they show us that over the past 30 years or so, trust in things like organized religion have dropped quite a bit. Trust in our political institutions as we know is very low.

So we think that trust is not possible today. But think of how much of our lives are really based on trust. If you ever took an elevator to the top floor of a tall building, or drive across a long bridge, where you trust that the engineers have done a good job in making it safe, or even gone to a store and bought food, trusting that it would be safe and clean?

On the other hand, sometimes those things let us down, and prove not to be trust worthy.

IF you do a search of the word trust in a Bible dictionary, you come up with around 240 different uses of the word. And you know what most of them say. The verses urge us all to trust in the Lord. The Bible warns us against trusting in kings, or would-be autocrats, or wealth, or even our own power.

Thinking about Jesus as friend takes it to the next level. When I have a friend I trust, there is no fear in that relationship, even when I make a mistake. My friend will offer grace and forgiveness.

Jesus says, I call you friends. Look at what happened when Jesus wen to the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He cried. We have a God who grieves with us when bad things happen, who causes new life to spring forth, and brings us into God's presence. God redeems bad things because of love.

The other aspect of God as friend involves a word which I had always struggled with. Relationship with God. What does that really mean?

If you can think of it in terms of friendship - relationship is an organic thing, always growing and changing. Those for instance who are married understand it can be hard work growing and changing over time.

I think I have shared before an idea of the word *religare* in Latin where we get our word "religion." It is a word which means to connect, to bind together

To that end,

One of my favorite authors, Diana Butler Bass, recently reflected on religion after the pandemic, and here is a challenging quote:

Quote: from Diana Butler Bass blogspace:

"What is the future of religion post-pandemic? Well, it depends. It depends if we continue to insist on the *other* definition of religion - as obligation to a particular order of things (like doctrine, polity, or moral action- a "bounden duty"). If nothing else, the pandemic has revealed that particular orders of things can be upset, overturned by the most unanticipated of things. If *religion* is about maintaining a certain order of liturgy, dogma, or practice, well, then, we can consider religion one more pandemic loss.

"If we think of *religion* in terms of *religare*, however, the task of the post-pandemic church - the work of

finding, repairing, and relocating – is clear. We must reconnect ourselves and others with time, history, physicality, and relationships. In this sense, the future of religion has never been brighter – our lost world needs finding.”

What have we learned about our connection to each other and especially to God these past 15 months? Is it really more about deepening a relationship with God moreso than the orderly practice of our faith, or a dogmatic set of rules, as much as we value that order?

Perhaps have we learned once again the ultimate lesson of the Bible, and that is that

friendship with God, connection with God, *religare* is about love.

There is no greater love than this, that someone would lay down his or her life for their friends. You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Jesus said “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”

One of the greatest signs of friendship and love in the ancient culture, and ours too, is to sit at table with someone. So the sacrament that Jesus invites us to, even virtually, is a sacrament of strengthening that *religare*, that connection, that commitment, and can we even go so far as to say, that friendship with the one who showed that there is no greater love.

So almighty God as we have been in isolation for a year or more, and beginning to come out of it, help us to receive you in a new way. Help us move from fear to

friendship. Help us to see that you provide us the strength and the commitment to go with you no matter what.

Friends! Count on it.