

**“CAN WE BE FRIENDS?”**  
**John 15:9-17; Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6**  
**May 21, 2006**  
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This week’s lesson will take you through a bit of a theological loop. I’m going to acknowledge that up front and take you on a journey with me. Whether it holds together as a sermon—you be the judge.

Our friendship was formed as we played on the sidewalks and in the yards on the 3400 block of West Rockwell Street in Spokane. There were tricycles, little plastic wading pools, fence boards that swung open almost keystone cops style allowing us to hide from Chris Carmen; there was the unfortunate incident with orange juice in a mailbox; we shared attempts to walk our dogs—his was named Snowflake, mine was named Muffy; and we both had sandboxes—mine in the sunny part of the yard, his in the shade. His name was Shawn, and he was my first friend. When I think about what friendship means and about how it is supposed to happen, Shawn’s face and a cacophony of our early childhood adventures fill my mind. When we moved out of that neighborhood during Christmas break of the year I was in kindergarten, I remember being horrified at the thought of leaving Shawn behind. We stayed in contact for years—though at different schools—having different, but occasionally overlapping, circles of friends; different music styles; different plans for the future. And although we are not currently in contact, I do occasionally hear news about Shawn through Spokane connections. It was my first friendship, and our shared adventures loom large in my memory. There is something that is mystical and blessed about friendships; and yet, as adults, I think friendships become something that we often underplay: relationships that we under value, connections that we don’t quite know how to describe or even understand. In our gospel reading for today, friendship plays a key role: and as Jesus alters his relationship with the disciples by referring to them as his “friends,” I think he also alters how we must think of our relationship to the divine, how we should think about our friends, and how we think of friendship in general.

First, let us note that our gospel reading for today is connected to last week’s lesson about vines and branches. The lesson offered God as the vine grower, Jesus as the vine, and the disciples and all who followed as the ever-growing branches in need of nurture and pruning. Amid the language of the vineyard, Jesus sought to have the disciples abide in him. This language is a sort of plea, a plea for them to believe and live fully in him. And last week’s lesson ends with the hopeful note that by abiding with Jesus then “God, the father is glorified, that you will bear much fruit, and become my disciples.” Last week’s text was filled with beautiful and tender images of relationship, but always in that part of the text there remains something of a separation between Jesus and his disciples. There is genuine care and intimacy expressed as Jesus asks them to abide in him; but always they remain his disciples, held a bit at arm’s length.

This week, however, as we move deeper into the passage, something changes. Progressing through this passage, the language of vine and branches has been replaced simply by language of love. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” There is new

intimacy in this verse, and in this language we begin to understand the hope that Jesus held out for his disciples. Jesus speaks of keeping his commandments—words that build upon the earlier question and answer period where Jesus announced that the greatest commandment was not one of the ten but, instead, was simply to love God with every bit of one’s being. The other was to love one’s neighbor. In the passage of today’s text, Jesus is reiterating his previous lessons for the disciples, but he ups the ante when he announces that

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 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 that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you.”*

Jesus is announcing that he, too, is taking up the call to love his neighbor and that living by that example means that the disciples are not simply people who travel with him: they are his friends, they are important people who be loves and cares for deeply.

As I read this passage early in the week, I found myself a bit stunned by Jesus elevating the disciples to the level of friend. I would suspect that the disciples, too, were surprised to be called friends by Jesus, for this was the One who they were following; this is the One who called them away from their jobs and families; this was a healer, miracle-worker, prophet—and now they were his friends? I can hear their mumbled comments to one another: “Can it be true? Can we be his friends?”

This passage uncovered for me a struggle that I often have, which is the struggle of how to name my relationship with the divine. By this I mean, what do I call that thing that is God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Father, Mother, Holy One, comforter, savior, and so much more? Where is the divine and how exactly can I describe the interaction? Suddenly, it was as if a seminary theology test were in front of me, and I began flailing around. This week when Jesus made the disciples his friends rather than his servants, I suddenly had a crisis on my hands because the servant model that Jesus blows apart is the role toward which I gravitate when I think about Jesus. And yet, he was dismantling that privileged status and, instead, wanted simply to be counted as their friend. Jesus as friend felt too close this week, and I am not entirely sure why.

Two different songs, both with theological language, ran through my head as I wrote this week, trying to understand why Jesus as friend was so unsettling and startling to me. First, there was Joan Armstrong’s neo-folk song from the mid-1990s called “One of Us.” In this song, Armstrong wonders what it might mean if God were simply one of us. She sings,

*“If God had a name what would it be?  
And would you call it to his face?  
If you were faced with Him in all His glory  
What would you ask if you had just one question?”*

*“What if God was one of us?  
Just a slob like one of us  
Just a stranger on the bus  
Tryin’ to make his way home?”*

*“If God had a face what would it look like?”*

The moment this song was released I both loved it and, at the same time, found myself theologically disturbed by the accessibility of God portrayed in these lyrics. On one hand, I love the image of God as slob, and I am sure this means that God’s car might be as messy as mine. But there is also something a bit disturbing about this song because at times I wonder if it makes God somehow less than what I need God to be, God as less than what I need. I say this knowing that I have Jesus action figures on my office bookshelves, but sometimes I just need to know that God is bigger, stronger, smarter, more visionary than I am. God as one of us: what a good and disturbing image!

The other song that immediately came to mind was Bette Midler’s late 1980s song, “From a Distance.” Among the lyrics to this song are these:

*“From a distance we all have enough,  
And no one is in need.  
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease,  
No hungry mouths to feed.*

*“From a distance we are instruments  
Marching in a common band.  
Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace.  
They’re the songs of every man.  
God is watching us. God is watching us.  
God is watching us from a distance.”*

This image of God is the other extreme, I think. Here we have God at a distance, watching us from “out there” somewhere. Sure, it is my theological projection; but these lyrics leave me cold with fear because I wonder what if God really is just watching us—laughing, perhaps, as we bumble along. Surely God is closer than that, right? Surely God does more than just gawk at us from the distant reaches of the universe. And yet, maybe, this song speaks truthfully about the magnificent power and perspective of God’s divine hand: maybe a distant, un-entangled God is what we need. And yet the “at a distance God” doesn’t quite work for me either.

There you have it friends, laid out in front of you: Jesus announces that the disciples are his friends, and it prompts massive theological discombobulation. Why does it matter what Jesus called his disciples; friends, servants, disciples—who cares, right?

This week I found that it mattered for me, and that it made me think in new ways. First, I recognized that Jesus wasn’t suddenly less of a savior simply because he named the disciples as

“friends.” Instead, the disciples were more than they had previously been because now they were not just disciples, they were friends of Jesus. This is subtle, but I think it speaks to the important role that the disciples played in the ministry and the life of Jesus; and it recognizes that they were all changed—Jesus and the disciples—by their common interactions.

But there is something more that happens when Jesus recognizes that the disciples are his friends. I believe that as he calls his disciples “friends” he anoints friendship with new meaning. There is a new recognition of the disciples and an announcement that friendship has spiritual and faith-building value and that there is something divinely inspired about the love that binds friends together. This is good news for us because I think it affirms the importance of our friendships and announces to us that, whether we know it or not, it is in these relationships that we are (or should be) finding spiritual sustenance.

So, when you gathered with friends for the game, did you get your Bibles out and talk about faith? Did you talk faith when you went walking or shopping with friends last week? Of course not; other things were happening—friendship was happening—and God was present and being revealed in that relationship and in those moments. When Jesus anoints the disciples with the friendship tag, he anoints us all and he anoints our friendships, too. Too often, I think, when we talk about God or spiritual growth, we assume that it has to be idyllic or that it has to be framed in well-defined serious theological language. Political activists often say that “the personal is the political” as a way of saying that there is no separation between personal beliefs and actions. The “friendship announcement” from Jesus reminds us that in the same way there is nothing—not even our little old friendships—that doesn’t have theological underpinnings, that the “personal is also the theological.” Jesus as a friend, God as “out there” or riding on a bus; from our earliest moments and from our first interactions with others, Jesus’s extension of friendship reminds us that we are being nurtured and raised by God in the tradition of Jesus, the One who had and needed friends.

Shawn, Jay, Shauna, Pat, Jeff, Brenda, Meridith, Randy, Linda, Gail and more: they are friends, each of them. And as I have wrestled with Jesus and the friendship question, I recognize that these people have been the voice of Jesus and the face of God for me, whether they know it or not. I still don’t know if God is way “out there” or riding in the next car, but it matters less than I thought it did a few days ago.

Just as I surely believe the disciples asked, “Can we be friends?”, when Jesus called them such, I also believe the friendship question should be upon our hearts as we seek to follow Jesus and live truthfully.

We are called to follow Jesus—into friendships—so that we might more fully experience the blessing of God’s creation through each other. This is not just a kid thing, it is a faith thing. And so I implore you, ask the question, “Can we be friends?” Thanks be to God. Amen.