

“Friendship with God and Each Other”

John 15:9–17

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Most of us grew up with an image of God as an eternal being worthy of our deepest respect. It is an image of a God who is up there somewhere, as opposed to right here, even though Christian tradition speaks of God as being immanent and transcendent. It is an image of God as Holy Other, Almighty Sovereign, All-Powerful and All-Knowing. It is often a parental image, or to be more precise, a fatherly image for most. It is an image of a God who is utterly beyond us and thus worthy our deepest reverence.

Since we grew up with this image, we might find Jesus’ words in John 15 a bit jolting. “No one has greater love than this,” he says, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Jesus, whom we believe to be the very essence of God in human form, chooses to call his followers friends, which means we are talking about relating to God not as a Distant Sovereign or Powerful Parent but as a friend. “What a friend we have in Jesus,” we sing. What in the world are we to make of this image?

I think we need to take Jesus seriously and understand that he is talking about an entirely new way of relating to him and thus to God. It is not that all respect is lost. He says that those who do what he commands are his friends. He is still our example and guide, he is still to be revered, he is still to be followed. It’s just that he chooses to function as a friend. We might think of this as a second *kenosis*, to use the Apostle Paul’s word in Philippians 2:7, a Greek word meaning “to empty oneself” – Christ empties himself into human form. And not only that, Jesus then chooses the designation of “friend” for his disciples.

This is not the only image we have of God. No single image can capture the whole of the Divine Being. In scripture God has fatherly and motherly characteristics, God is a Divine Lover, God is like a mother hen and a foundational rock, God is mysterious, utterly unknowable and yet also

revealed to us. All of these images and concepts point to some aspect of the Divine, but none of them tells the whole story. To equate any single image with God is, by definition, idolatry.

In an old issue of *Non Sequitur* a dog is greeting a startled man at the entrance to heaven. The robed dog, who looks like a German Shepherd to me, says, “Well, yes... considering you people have been spelling my name backward all this time, I imagine this would come as a bit of a surprise to you.” “Is God really a dog?” some might ask. Well, is God really a man, or a woman, or a rock or a bird? All images of God are just that, images, but they all point to some aspect of who God is.

Jesus includes “friend” in his list of images, and this means we are invited to relate to the Divine in this way. God may be Holy Other, but God is also Present Friend. Indeed, at the very heart of Christian faith lies the claim that God desires an intimate relationship with all of creation, including a friendship with human beings. God loves the world so much that enters the world as one of us, taking on human flesh. It is what we call incarnation and the concepts of immanence and intimacy are both embedded in this reality. The God who comes to dwell with us wants to be close to us and have a relationship with us. It may seem beneath God, but it is what the God who was in Christ chooses.

I think of a pen pal our daughter had for a while. As a part of the 50th anniversary in my previous setting, Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, we invited Tony Campolo to speak. Tony is a spirited evangelical preacher with a long history of engaging significant social concerns, a big name in Baptist life and someone I have known for some time. Tony did not disappoint, and the bonus for our family was that his wife, Peggy, befriended Ali, who was a rising fourth-grader at the time, and the two became pen pals. Why would a woman like Peggy Campolo, who had her own accomplishments, befriend a young child? I don’t know, but she did, and it meant a lot to our daughter at the time.

In like manner, we may wonder why God would choose to befriend us. What do we have to offer God? Who knows? But God chooses to befriend us. The least we can do is take God up on the offer. This means relating to God as a friend, the best kind of friend — making time to talk to God, being willing to be honest with God, being trustworthy in the way we live and relate

to God, seeking the best for God in all our actions and allowing God to pursue the best in us.

In the reading from John, Jesus says he commands us to love one another, as he has loved us. We may wonder whether love can be commanded, compelled, coerced. But Jesus doesn't really coerce. He commands but as a friend who comes alongside us, which we might find compelling. Most of us are willing to do far more, willingly, joyfully even, for a friend who has gained respect than for someone who claims great authority over us, no matter how powerful they are. In his infinite wisdom, Jesus claims us as friends, and a result, we are willing to do anything for him — love one another, lay down our lives, if necessary.

But in calling his followers friends, Jesus is not only talking about relating to God in an entirely new way; he is also talking about a way we might relate to one another. If we are his friends, we are friends to each other. Whatever is included in this concept speaks not only to our relationship with God but also to our relationships with each other, to the kind of community we seek to shape in the church.

We have some idea of how we understand the term today, but what does it mean in the first century? Any difference is significant because Jesus is speaking in the first century, using concepts as they are understood at the time.

One thing to note from the outset is that the Greek word for friend is *philos* which comes from the word *phileo*, one of several Greek words which mean “to love.” In other words, the most immediate meaning of friend is “one who loves.” This sounds like a more significant attachment of meaning than we sometimes think of in regard to our friends, and the classical understanding of the term is even stronger.

New Testament Scholar and former Wake Forest Divinity School Dean Gail O'Day notes that in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, friendship was a key social relationship. In fact, Aristotle says that, if necessary, a friend will lay down his life for his friends. Plato says that only those who love wish to die for others. And Lucian promises to tell his readers “many deeds of blood and battles and death for the sake of friends (as quoted from an address to the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008).”

We hear the word “friend” and think of a good companion, someone to enjoy time with, perhaps even someone we can depend on, but we don’t often think of laying down life. Jesus does. He is talking about a deeper bond that involves love, his kind of self-giving love. This is how he loves us and he calls us to love each other in the same way, to be the kind of friends to each other that he is to us. Literally laying down life isn’t often required, but are we willing to sacrifice anything for one another, give anything of ourselves?

I know of stories in this church that document a resounding “yes” answer to this question, stories about couples who have cared for the children of others after a crisis; stories about people who have taken in former inmates with no possessions, jobs or dignity, and helped rebuild their lives; stories about staying with those who have known profound loss as long as it takes for the light of hope to arise. We are quite often friends to each other in this deeper, richer sense.

Gail O’Day also notes another aspect of ancient friendship. It has to do with honesty or frankness in speech. In a document entitled “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend” Plutarch says “frankness of speech, by common report and belief, is the language of friendship especially (as an animal has its peculiar cry), and on the other hand, that lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble (p. 51).” That just rings true. Genuine friendship has to involve a deep level of trust and trust depends on our willingness to be honest, when it is easy do so and when it is not.

Dana’s mother was known to be a straight shooter. I called her a loose cannon, but I meant it affectionately, though I trembled when she visited churches I served. When she observed Dana’s father’s boss, the head of a huge company, whistle for another drink at a party, she raised an eyebrow at him. “Joann, you think me rude?” he said, to which she replied, “I do.” Dan thought his job was lost, but the man appreciated someone being honest with him. He would have Joann seated next to him at important events because she would tell him what she thought.

Honesty is a key component of any healthy relationship, including our relationship with God. My youth minister taught me years ago that honesty may be what God desires above all else. It is also critical to genuine friendship, to the way we relate to each other in the church.

If we are to be friends to each other, in the sense Jesus has in mind, we have to have a self-giving love for each other and speak the truth — in love, never bluntly, never using honesty as an excuse for personal assault. And then, there is at least one other implication of this way of relating to each other — it is non-hierarchical. True friends are on equal footing. True friends all have an equal voice. Jesus' followers do not lord it over each other, he says numerous times; they serve each other, as he serves us. That is a different way of relating, a different kind of community.

In his book *The Passion for Life*, Jurgen Moltmann says the church is a hospitable community where we bring friendliness into the unfriendly corners of society. It is a new kind of living together that affirms:

- that no one is alone with his or her problems,
- that no one has to conceal his or her disabilities,
- that there are not some who have the say and others who have nothing to say,
- that neither the old nor the little ones are isolated,
- that one bears the other even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement, and
- that, finally, the one can also at times leave the other in peace when the other needs it. (pp. 32-33)

That is an image of the church, at our best — this church.

It has been said that true friendship — the kind that involves honesty and trust and a willingness to stand with each other in love on equal ground — is a rare gift. If we have two to three true friends in a lifetime, we should consider ourselves fortunate. Well, we already have one in Christ, and we are called to seek this way of relating to every other member of the body of Christ. It may seem like an unreasonable expectation, and we will not have the same depth of relationship with everyone, but if we begin by nurturing the one Friendship we all have, we will grow in our capacity to extend love and friendship to others.