

Friendship with God

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman
May 5-6, 2018
Easter 6

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

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. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

John 15:9-17 (NRSV)

The month of May is here, and it seems spring has finally arrived! This month we will celebrate Mother's Day and Memorial Day. We will remember and give thanks for others. Devotion and dedication, service and sacrifice.

This month, too, many celebrate transitions: graduations, weddings, and births. Our students will move from one grade to another.

The days are longer as the world around us wakes up.

Last week I read of an unusual graduate. Ninety-six-year-old World War II veteran Bob Barger returned from the war years ago and went right to work. He never finished college. The University of Toledo reviewed his transcripts and noticed that he had completed enough courses to qualify for a two-year diploma, which was not offered when he was in school 68 years ago. "It was something I never dreamed of," Bob said, "I'm going to be proud to hang that diploma on the wall and think about the friends behind it. I found without friends, this old world wouldn't be worth living in." [1]

Indeed. In our Gospel lesson from John, we continue where we left off last week: We are branches connected to the Vine. We are to abide—or stay connected—to the Vine by loving each other. Here Jesus calls his disciples "friends." The disciples are not named or numbered. It is a continuous calling and includes us!

Friendship was important in the ancient world. There were two kinds: the political—

patron/client—and the kinship, which was more reciprocal. Friends always looked out for the wellbeing of one another. And were even willing to defend the friend with one's life.

In John, Jesus is telling the disciples that he is their friend. He is willing to give his life for them. And he has brought them into a relationship of reciprocal love. He is, through them, creating a community of friends, willing to sacrifice for each other. [2]

The Anglo Saxon word for "friend" is *Freon*, which means, "to love." It is not cozy, but conscious. Friends stick up for each other. This kind of love makes sure that justice gets done in the world.

Aristotle tells us there are three kinds of friendships. The first two are self-serving and more superficial, friends who are useful and enjoyable. These two kinds of friendship do not love the person for their character, but for what the other can offer. The third type of friendship is based on goodness and virtue, and wishes goodness for friends for the friends' sake, not our own. The third type of friendship is the best kind. And it also provides purpose and pleasure.

(Aristotle also insisted that we cannot be friends with inanimate objects. He wrote, that as much as we may wish, we cannot be friends with wine!)

We are very likely to become the company we keep. Thomas Aquinas taught that part of the goal of the Christian life was to become friends with God. In this he said we take on God's character as our own. [3]

Ah! The Bible tells us that the character of God is chiefly Steadfast Love, *Hesed*. This friendship transforms us as we reflect God's love for each other creation.

Do you know the poem "The Creation" from *Gods Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson? It starts out with the line "And God stepped out on space, and he looked around and said: I'm lonely—I'll make me a world ..."

At the end of the poem, Johnson describes God as sitting down, "with his head in his hands," thinking, "I'll make me a man!"

"This great God, like a mammy bending over her baby, kneeled down in the dust toiling over a lump of clay... til he shaped it in his own image; Then into it he blew the breath of life, And man became a living soul. Amen. Amen." [4]

It is good to be reminded, and to imagine again, that God wants to be in relationship with us. God wants friendship! This is the dynamic. Remember: Steadfast love pursues us our whole life!

Carlo Rovelli is an Italian physicist and author who teaches in Southern France. Recently he was interviewed about his new book, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*. The

book is only 78 pages long and sounds fascinating. I never studied physics, but I thoroughly enjoy reading what Rovelli has to say. Faithful to the “relational” interpretation of quantum mechanics, Rovelli writes in *Reality Is Not What It Seems*, “When describing the strange new world of quantum physics, where we can only claim the reality of a particle through its interaction with others. It is only in interactions that nature draws the world.” [5] Or, another way of saying it is that the world of quantum physics is not a world of objects: it is a world of events.

Rovelli sees the world, as his beloved Ionian philosopher Anaximander did around 600 BC, as an eternal flow between events, some more durable than fleeting.

Jesus was not a physicist, but he knew that interaction shapes reality!

In our Gospel lesson this weekend, from what is called The Farewell Discourse, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the future. He is inviting them to join him and to carry on in the “family business,” to interact with others as sisters and brothers.

Friendship matters because friends *interact*. In an article titled “4 Reasons Friendship Are So Important,” therapist Arlin Cuncic describes some key elements of friendships:

1. Friends offer **encouragement and support**, especially in times of crises and turbulence. Friends help each other.
2. Having friend boosts **self-esteem**, without friends we feel lonely—like God without the world!. And depressed. Without friends, we are vulnerable to other dependencies, and substance abuse. (We will remember what Aristotle taught: Wine is not our friend!)
3. Friends also **keep us active**—moving, doing things. Because of friends we go places and do things we may not otherwise do. Friends challenge our anxiety.
4. Friends are a **positive influence**. We hear about negative peer pressure. But having relationships with generous, compassionate people improves our lives!
[6]

We recognize that God speaks to us in images, events, and through Scripture. But it’s also important to recognize that God speaks to us in friendships.

This weekend is the final Sunday School for the season. And this coming Wednesday, our Faith in Daily Living, confirmation classes, and senior high youth ministry all finish up. Last week, the eighth graders had their final review with their teacher, Jeanne Flynn. Some were a bit nervous as they reviewed three years worth of material, Old and New Testament, the Small Catechism, Lutheran teachings, and St. Mark’s mission, vision and leadership. One of the things the students are expected to know is the name of the president of our congregation. I heard that the class called our president, Don Friend, “Don ‘My’ Friend.”

On May 26th Caitlyn Fecht and Royce Golembeck will be married here. They started out as friends in the senior high youth group and attended youth mission trips together. The Gospel reading they have chosen for their wedding is the same lesson as ours today: "I have loved you; abide in me ... I have called you friends."

We are invited into the "family business" over and over again. We are connected to the Vine and to each other. Here in our sanctuary, the vine is carved into the font, pulpit, organ, and table. We are connected to each other and to God through water, word, meal, and music.

We are invited to participate. To let go and take risks. To forgive and grow in humility and awareness. To trust that God wants our friendship and pursues us. We are lifted by compassion and encouragement.

Our reality is claimed and shaped by interaction with others.

The old hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" by Joseph Scriven is still a favorite for many. Scriven's story is a sad one. He was born in Ireland, into a wealthy family, and he was well educated. The night before his wedding to the love of his life, his bride fell from her horse into the water below and drowned. Scriven stood on the bank helpless. In grief he wandered to Canada where he tutored poor children. Again, he fell in love and planned to marry. And, again, before the wedding his fiancé died. Scriven coped by serving among the poor widows and children. He shared what he had and chopped wood for those who couldn't. He became a friend to many. "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" is a poem he wrote for his mother before his death.

We may not suffer the severe losses of Joseph Scriven, but we know of trials, troubles, discouragement, and despair. We know enough to know we need a friend.

As we grow up and grow older, the demands of life and love change ... with children, parents, ourselves ... at work, school, and home. Perhaps you have heard that this Tuesday a new, chattier Alexa is ready for shipping. This new interactive digital assistant is child friendly. An ad for it read: "New Alexa will raise your child for you..."

My mother is amazed by Alexa and the things we can ask of Alexa. My mother says, half seriously, "Kids today don't even need to go to school!"

Oh, yes, they do! We need relationships, real ones, to be connected to each other. The love that we give and the love we receive connect us to the Source that looks out for our well-being.

Together we are connected to the One who calls us "friend."

Remember: We are very likely to become the company we keep!

Ninety-six-year-old Bob Barger is right: “Without friends, this old world wouldn’t be worth living in.”

Amen.

[1] *The Daily Herald*, May 1, 2018.

[2] Osvaldo Vena, “John 15:9-17 Commentary,” workingpreacher.org, May 6, 2018.

[3] *Feasting on the Word* and various internet articles

[4] James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, 1927.

[5] Carlo Rovelli, *Reality Is Not What it Seems*, Allen Lane, 2016.

[6] Arlin Cuncic, “4 Reasons Friendships Are So Important,” www.verywellmind.com/the-importance-of-friendship-3024371

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