

"Freeing Jesus: Our Friend"

Exodus 33:7-11a; John 15:10-17

1st Sunday of Lent

Message for March 6, 2022

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Think about one of your closest friends and how you share life with each other. You probably share things you wouldn't share with anyone else. The things they know about you are, more than likely, deeply personal. Perhaps you might even be able to finish each other's sentences or tell exactly what the other is thinking. I think about this sort of relationship when I read about the Lord speaking face to face with Moses. There's a very rare intimacy between God and Moses.

Just like with human relationships, this relationship didn't happen overnight. In Exodus 3 and 4, we read of God igniting this relationship through the burning bush. Despite God's display of power and authority, Moses gave reasons why he couldn't lead the Hebrews from captivity. But, as the exodus of God's people progresses, Moses becomes more and more intimate with God, and at this point in the text, we find him alone in a tent, 'face to face' with God on a regular basis. And the people Moses led knew it.

As with Moses, God is seeking relationship with us. Ever since God walked through the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3 looking for Adam and Eve, he's been diligently seeking after his human creation. He's sent prophets, angels (archangels, even!), and ultimately, his own son, Jesus. The temple is a great illustration of God's movement toward us. In the passage above, the tent of meeting is outside the camp. Numbers 1 and 2 show the tabernacle in the middle of the camp, surrounded by the Hebrews, with their tents facing the tabernacle. Solomon builds the temple in the midst of Jerusalem, the city itself residing in the midst of Israel. Finally, in the Gospels we read of Jesus's sacrifice, leading to his living within us, his temple! (1 Corinthians 6:19)

When and where is it that you connect best with Jesus? Wherever and whenever it is, we each are invited to seek Jesus - and we see in the relationship that Moses has with the Divine, that true friendship and connection is waiting for us.

The Gospel reading from John also offers us insights about friendship and the love that is required of all of us. The language of this text likely feels

problematic to many of us - words such as “command” and “servant” can set off an intense reaction in us or cause us to shut down. So, I found it helpful when I read a story that Diana Butler Bass highlighted in her *Friend* chapter in “Freeing Jesus.” She wrote, *In August 2019, at the beginning of the school year in the United States, a photo showing two little boys holding hands went viral. Conner, an autistic boy entering the second grade, was going to school for the first time. Although the bus trip went well, when he arrived at the school, he froze with fear and started to cry; he hid in a corner, unable to walk into the building. Christian, another boy, saw Conner and went to comfort him. Then he took Conner by the hand and led him inside the building.*

“He found me and held my hand, and I got happy tears,” Conner later told a reporter when asked about Christian. “He was kind to me. I was in the first day of school, and I started crying. Then he helped me, and I was happy.” Conner’s mother said, “Christian is Conner’s first real friend.” And Christian’s mother explained, “They have an inseparable bond.”

Like millions of others who saw the photograph and read this story, I felt verklempt, unable to hold back small tears of joy. I also laughed - because who would believe it without a picture? A white boy named Conner huddled in a corner, a Black boy named Christian - Christian! - reaching out to help him. It was an updated American parable, a rewrite of The Pilgrim’s Progress for an age of racial anxiety and political division. As I looked at the photograph, it seemed an icon for these days, a Jesus tenderly leading a frightened boy toward a new world. “This is my commandment,” said Jesus, “that you love one another as I have loved you.... You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

I am not sure if I ever knew what to make of those words of Jesus: “You are my friends IF you do what I command you.” It all sounds conditional. What kind of friendship is that? But the story of Conner and Christian clarifies it.

Friendship is contingent on love - real love: compassion, empathy, reaching out, going beyond what we imagine is possible. That is the command: **love**. And IF we reach out in love, friendship is the result - even friendship with God.

Friendship is mutual, a hand extended and another reaching back.

When I think of friendship with Jesus, I imagine that hand extended. It happens in different ways, of course. Sometimes, the hand is part of an ancient story, the hand of Jesus outstretched to embrace little children or invite us to follow him. But more often it is the hand of another person.

When I feel afraid, huddled in a corner, unable to move forward, it is the hand that reaches out to comfort me, reminding me that I am not alone, or guiding me toward the next step on my journey. St Teresa of Avila once said, “God has no hands but yours.... Yours are the hands with which God blesses all the world.”

Sometimes, I am the one who needs the hand; at other times, mine is the hand that reaches. Friendship is an eternal circle, the ceaseless reaching toward one another that strengthens us and gives us joy.

“I do not call you servants,” Jesus said, “but I have called you friends.”
What an incredible invitation.

As we reflect on who Jesus is, we find that in knowing Jesus as friend, we too can see the potential within ourselves as friends to others. Amen.