

“I Call You Friends” Part I: Our Savior, Our Friend
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October 23, 2016

Having just finished our first fall series in which we spent five weeks envisioning world-wide cataclysm due to climate change, we thought we'd lighten things up significantly for this series. Given that our nation is experiencing its own form of cataclysm in the political realm, perhaps this series will be especially welcome.

The subject of this series is friendship and the primary role friendships play in the growth and development of our relationship with God.

Does this series sound like a more light-hearted, potentially fun one? Now suppose I would have instead said, “The subject of this series is about how God is the Lord of our lives and that we are all called to bring each and every element of our lives into submission before God’s throne.”

Would this latter series sound like more of a “downer” in your imagination than the first series on friendship? If so, then this just shows how much you may benefit from our present series. While the descriptions may sound completely different, they are two ways of describing the exact same series. By the end of it, you should have no trouble understanding God as both Friend and Lord, or how God’s lordship is deeply based in God’s friendship.

To most people the word Lord seems far more appropriate to addressing the Divine than does Friend. Lordship implies sovereignty. Friendship implies parity. Therefore, God could never rightly be called Friend.

Yet if friendship with God is antithetical to God’s sovereignty, then you may scratch your head over the statement about Abraham in the Epistle of James in which we read, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the *friend of God*.”

Similarly, if friendship and lordship cannot coexist, you may wonder why people would accuse Jesus of being “a glutton, and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” (Luke 7:34; Matt 11:19)

Or how do you explain religious movements like the 14th Century German mystics who were called “God’s Friends on the Lower Rhine,” or the latter “Society of Friends” (also known as the Quakers).

Finally, there are the mysterious words of Jesus in John’s Gospel. Speaking to his disciples at the end of his ministry he commands them to love each other as he has loved them, then says,

“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.” (John 15:15)

If we are to understand what John’s Gospel is trying to tell us, it is not simply that the disciples are *Jesus’s* friends. For it is John’s Gospel where we find Jesus claiming that, “I and the Father are One.” (John 10:30) Thus, in being friends of Jesus, the disciples also know themselves to be friends of God.

Now, once I quote Jesus’s statement about him and the Father being One, I know there are several handfuls of you who will react. “Was Jesus really God?” you ask. That’s a fair question, but it diverts us from the central issue this morning (If you can hold your horses, I’ll address the whole Jesus and God thing during Lent next year, where I’ll show that Jesus and God were One with respect to his Calling, not his Nature.)

For now, I simply invite you to envision what your relationship would look like if it is indeed possible that you, like Abraham, Jesus’s disciples, the 14th Century mystics, and the Quakers can be friends with God. What would such a relationship look like?

Well, do you have a good friend or two? What does the relationship look like between you and a very good friend?

I have a good friend whom many of you know. His name is Scott Griessel, the producer of the internet television program we hosted for five years called *Darkwood Brew*. Scott and I have been friends, however, for about a dozen years. One of the other significant things we’ve done together was the walk across America in 2006, where Scott was the film director for the documentary.

One of the features of our relationship that stands out is that we can bare our souls to each other. And while we’re not always proud of what we divulge, we trust that we’ll not be rejected in our vulnerability. This is because we know that the other person sees enough good in us to provide context to whatever we’re telling each other. Another feature of our relationship is that we regularly disagree with each other on all kinds of issues, and that we’re not afraid to voice disagreement to the other person. Neither of us is simply going to affirm what the other is thinking. Thus, we trust that by staying in relationship despite our disagreements, one or both of us will expand our awareness, and potentially improve our walk upon the earth.

Through my relationship with Scott Griessel, I have come to know God a little more deeply as Friend. If God is my friend, then God is not less loving or caring than Scott, but radically more loving and caring. Thus, I can bare my soul fully to God, admitting to any amount of faults, doubts, or struggles, and that God will not only accept me as I am, but will be aware of so much more good in me (good that I often do not see myself) that God can help me work through my struggles from the standpoint of appreciation and kindness.

Yet, if God is a friend like Scott, then God isn't simply going to agree with everything I say simply because God is my friend. Scott is too good a friend not to counter my backward thinking at times, and because God is an even better friend, then I can count the fact that God isn't simply going to bless my every whim and notion.

One last point about my relationship with Scott should be mentioned in this regard. There are times when Scott and I simply are not going to see eye-to-eye on an issue no matter how much we talk it out. When we run into these kinds of impasses we simply agree to disagree. We may joke about our differences now and again – about how lame the other's ideas are about one thing or another – but we're just having good fun with each other while reminding the other that we haven't been persuaded to take up their side. Our friendship is not diminished, but deepened, by the fact that we're not trying to run each other's lives. Our relationship isn't based on a tabulation of rights and wrongs, but sincere enjoyment of the other person.

Likewise, God's friendship with any of us is based on a similar foundation. There are tons of times when I'm sure that God has tried to get me to look out at life from a very different vantage-point than I've been looking. God has sent nudges and hints, or even whacked me on the head a time or two, but when I'm dead set on heading in the wrong direction, God basically shuts up and lets me make the wrong turn, or live for the wrong values, knowing that, if nothing else, the pain I create for myself will cause me to see things differently eventually. God isn't trying to run my life, you see. God isn't "trying" to do anything with me. It's love of the relationship that binds God to me and me to God. That's it. No tabulation of rights and wrongs.

If you want some notion of how strong the bond of friendship is between you and God – at least on God's end of the relationship, consider again Jesus's words to his disciples:

"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."

The bond of friendship between God and us is stronger than death itself.

In Jesus's words we also discover the relationship is between God's friendship and God's sovereignty. As our friend, God does not command us to be good, or even just or right. All God, our Friend, commands of us is to love each other the way God loves us. If you want to experience the power of your friendship with God, love others the way God loves you.

And if you want to experience a fraction of God's love for you, I have a suggestion for the next time you approach God in prayer. I invite you to imagine that your very best friend is before you – someone who is no less loving or gracious, or endearing, or wise than your very best friends on earth. If you will treat God like your very best friend, you will eventually come to know the God who Jesus and Abraham, knew as Friend. This is a promise I make to you. More importantly, it is a promise the Scriptures make.