

The Four Great Friendships, Part I: God as Friend

by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Niantic Community Church
September 10, 2023

“Friendship Sunday”

Scripture: Genesis 3:22-24; John 15:15

I. What a Friend We Have In ...

How time flies! There are just twelve Sundays left before I'll be moving on to my next Call – ten of which I'm preaching. I've put a lot of thought into what I would want to say in the limited time I have left here – what is most important. Initially, I decided to preach this series on my last four Sundays. After thirty years of ministry, the power of friendship has arisen as one of the most important forces in the Christian Church – if only we'd recognize it, and double-down on our ability to create and nurture lasting, sacred friendships. I eventually changed my mind on the timing. How could I not start a series about friendship on “Friendship Sunday”? So, here goes.

I used to think that it was very important to know whether Jesus was God or not. The older I get, however, the more I become convinced that the most important question is not, “Is Jesus like God?” but, “Is God like Jesus?”

The reason I am a Christian minister, and remain a Christian despite how much Christianity has become hijacked by political interests and the prevailing culture of our day, is because I believe with all my heart, mind, and soul that God is, in fact, like Jesus. In other words, whether or not Jesus is God, or a mere mortal, or both, I believe that Jesus's life and ministry, and his death and resurrection, reveals the very heart of God's heart.

This belief has made all the difference in the world to me.

It's not that Jesus alone reveals God's heart. You've heard me affirm many times that the natural world reveals much about what God's love looks like, smells like, tastes like, feels like. Yet, this very assumption stems from my love for, and faith in, Jesus.

After all, it is not blatantly obvious that Nature is an incarnation of the Divine. Throughout history, many religions and philosophies have espoused that Nature is evil, or least illusory, or that a love of Nature creates a negative spiritual effect. Yet, if God is like Jesus, then the very fact that God could shine so clearly through mortal flesh and blood tells me that it is far more likely than not that God's presence and power flows through all living things. It is precisely because of my belief that God is revealed in Jesus that I also believe that God can be revealed in all living things.

What does all this have to do with being friends with God? Considering how broken we human beings are – how quickly we move from a state of love to hate, from gratitude to greed, from generosity to stinginess, from grace and forgiveness to judgment and condemnation of others – it is not immediately apparent to me why God would want anything to do with us at all, let alone be friends.

It is said that, “You can’t choose your family but you can choose your friends.” If we are God’s children, then God probably has to love us, at least a little a bit, no matter how badly we mess up. But this doesn’t mean God has to be friends with us. Friendship is many orders of magnitude higher than most other forms of love. Higher because it is freely chosen, without any compulsion or requirement.

Given our broken human condition, therefore, I might expect God to love us, but I would be flabbergasted by a God who would seek *friendship* with us. Yet this is precisely the kind of God that Jesus reveals.

How does Jesus reveal such a God? First off, even in the Lord’s Prayer, where Jesus teaches us to pray to God not merely as Creator but as Father, the word he uses isn’t the formal word for Father, but the informal one. It’s not really “Father” so much as “Daddy.”

“Daddy” is hardly an image that suggest the stern, disciplinarian God who never thinks we are good enough and wrestles with anger management issues. “Daddy” – or “Mommy,” if you prefer – is the kind of God who plays in the sandbox with us; who runs around on the beach with us splashing water on our backs hoping we’ll turn around and splash water back. While “Father/Mother” God might spank us when we misbehave or send us to Boarding School so as not to be bothered with us, “Daddy/Mommy” God is the one who corrects our behavior more through understanding and empathizing with us, then showing us more productive uses for our anxious energies.

Yet, Jesus doesn’t just take a word for God like “Father,” and turn it into the kinder, gentler, “Daddy.” In John 15:15, we find Jesus telling his disciples, ‘I do not call you servants any longer ... but *friends*.’

If God is like Jesus, and Jesus reveals the heart of God’s heart, then God’s desire is not simply that we serve God, our kind and gentle Father, but that we actually become friends with God.

If I hadn’t experienced this supreme level of intimacy for myself in a mystical experience back in 1981, and if I didn’t continue to experience bits and pieces of this same desire regularly ever since, I’m not sure I would believe even Jesus about God’s desire to be friends.

Then again, if it weren’t for Jesus revealing that God desires friendship, I might not have ever trusted my mystical experience, or its ongoing reverberations. I might chalk them up to chemical imbalances, or the sparking of synapses in the brain that provoke momentary feelings of oneness and bliss.

So, in Jesus, both scripture and experience converge to offer me the same message: “You are loved beyond your wildest imagination – because God loves you not out of obligation, but free choice. God wants to be not simply your loving parent, but your loving friend.”

II. Moving from Misperception to Reality

Of course, there are days when I lose my faith in a God who wants to be my friend. After all, much of our society holds a view of God that is far from friendly. Sometimes the force of the cultural current that worships a god of hellfire and condemnation causes me to lose sight of the love and grace I know so well.

Have you ever heard the Taoist parable about the man who lost his axe?

A man lost his axe, and suspected his neighbor's son of stealing it. Observing the boy's movements and expressions, everything about him – the way he talked, the way he looked, the way he acted – seemed to the man like that of a thief. Later, however, when the man accidentally found his axe in a place he had forgotten, the behaviors of the neighbor's son no longer appeared suspicious.

The point of this story, of course, is that our perceptions and beliefs about a situation or person can cloud our judgment and interpretation of Reality. When the man suspected his neighbor's son, everything the boy did looked suspicious. But once the man found his axe, the boy's behavior no longer seemed unusual.

Our perceptions of God are often shaped by pre-conceived notions that bear as little relation to Reality as the man's perception that his neighbor's son was a thief. They cause us to read certain motivations into God's actions that wouldn't be there if we had not already brought certain assumptions about God to the table.

When many of us read Scripture, our interpretations are profoundly influenced by a conscious or unconscious assumption that God is a stern disciplinarian who can never be pleased, or a harsh judge with anger management issues. So, guess what we find God to be in Scripture?

Now, to be clear, we are not helped by the fact that certain people in the scriptures themselves held similar assumptions. Take Moses, for instance.

Really, when it comes right down to it, it is impossible to interpret the scriptures objectively, perfectly free of our preconceived assumptions, just as it is impossible to interpret anything else, like the U.S. Constitution. We all bring certain assumptions to the table. The key is to be clear about what assumptions we are allowing to color our perceptions.

I mean no disrespect to Moses or Judaism, but as Christians, are our perceptions to be guided by Moses or Jesus? That's a trick question!

While Moses clearly considered God to be a strict disciplinarian and harsh judge, and earnestly proclaimed such a God, even Moses had an inkling that God desires to relate with us in a completely different way. In Exodus 31:11, for instance, we read, "The Lord would speak with Moses face to face, *as one speaks to a friend.*"

Given the context of oppression and slavery that Moses and his people had lived under for so long, I can forgive Moses for his inability to conceive of God as anything other than a strict task master for more than a few moments at a time.

In any case, when I read scripture, I try to let Jesus's view of God influence me more than Moses, even when I'm reading the words of Moses.

Some people believe that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. This view is demonstrably false, but whomever wrote these scriptures, I wish more Christians would allow Jesus to color their interpretations than the original authors and editors. If they would, then Christianity might become a little more, well, *Christian*. At least if "Christian" means Jesus-like.

How would such a coloring change our reading of Scripture? Well, first we would all be taking the wisdom and stories of the Old Testament a lot more seriously – because Jesus took them seriously. The New Testament was not Jesus’s Bible. The Old Testament was.

Second, we would be turning popular interpretations of Scripture on their heads – just as Jesus did in his day.

Take the story of Adam and Eve, for instance. What does this story tell us about God? For most Christians, the story teaches us about a God who has such severe anger management issues that God would punish this couple and all their future offspring down to this day (except for certain Jesus-following Christians) for all of eternity in the fires of hell for making a single mistake.

How would Jesus read this story, given that he reveals God’s heart of hearts, and that in God’s heart of hearts, God freely chooses to be friends with us, quite apart from any obligation or requirement.

To understand how Jesus might interpret this story – or at least how one who chooses to be influenced by Jesus might interpret it – I invite you to picture your very best friend in the entire world. Bear in mind that our best friends see all your faults better than most people do, because they know us so well. Yet, they choose not only to love us, but to exist in vulnerable, personal relationship with us nevertheless. Now, multiply your best friend’s love for you by a factor of a million. This is the picture of God you should be holding in your mind as we move through this story.

I’ll refer to God as our “Super Best Friend” in the story just to make sure we don’t lose sight of this God. You and I will play Adam and Eve.

According to the story, our Super Best Friend created a perfect paradise for us. All our Super Best Friend asked in return is that we not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, lest we should die. Since we had no knowledge of Good or Evil, the serpent was able to trick us into believing it’s perfectly fine to go against our Super Best Friend’s request and eat from the tree.

Of course, our Super Best Friend knew what was good for us all along, which is why we were told not to eat from that tree in the first place. Knowledge of Good and Evil doesn’t make life easier, but much, much harder and more stressful. We begin fighting with one another – even killing each other – once we start labeling some people “good” and others “evil.”

Worse, just because we have knowledge of the existence of Good and Evil doesn’t mean we actually have the capacity to accurately discern one from the other. So, we end up labeling a lot of Good things as “evil,” and a lot of Evil things as “good.” As Adam and Eve, our lives became a thousand times harder for us after eating that fruit.

There was no need for our Super Best Friend to punish us when our mistake was discovered. We had already punished ourselves by experiencing the consequences of our own decision. Life became harder. When the author of Genesis 3 speaks of God “punishing” us – we need to remember that this author was influenced by a culture of slavery where failure to obey was punished severely. What the author of Genesis 3 is actually observing about life is not God’s

punishment but the simple fact that life becomes harder when we make choices that are contrary to what our Super Best Friend intends for us.

As Adam and Eve, we know another thing, too, which the author of Genesis 3 conveys. When we ate the fruit and became aware of the fact that we were naked, we became ashamed of our nakedness. While our Super Best Friend saw no reason for us to be ashamed, our Friend nevertheless sewed skins together as garments to cover our nakedness and make us feel better. What else would a Super Best Friend do, right?

Now, what about this kicking us out of the Garden situation we read about in Genesis? Isn't this what a stern disciplinarian or harsh judge would do, especially if this judge planned to throw us into hellfire for eternity after we die for our original mistake?

Not at all. In fact, eternal torture is exactly what our Super Best Friend was seeking to avoid by banishing us from the Garden to begin with.

We've covered this territory before, but it takes a while before what's happening really sinks in. Consider the reason given for our Super Best Friend banishing us in the first place: "See, the man (and woman) has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."

Had our Super Best Friend not removed us from the Garden, we would have eaten from the Tree of Life and locked in our sinful state, with all its brokenness and burden – its fighting, murder, and mayhem – for eternity. In other words, Eternal Paradise would have become for us Eternal Hell.

No, being banished from the Garden so that we would live as mortals while on earth rather than immortals was the greatest protection mechanism we ever received. It means that while each and every one of the decisions we make on earth comes with consequences, none of these consequences are eternal.

We don't need Jesus to save us from Eternal Hell. God saved us from Eternal Hell the very moment we came within an inch of being there. What Jesus saves us from is Hell in *this* life, not the next.

One of the ways he saves us from Hell in this life is by revealing the heart of God's heart; that despite our continual brokenness and infidelity to God, God continually chooses not only to love you, but to extend a hand of friendship. If you've never conceived that God would desire friendship with you, or accepted God's offer, then you have yet to experience the full extent of the freedom and joy that God intends for you to experience in this life.

They say that the gates of Hell are locked from within. It is not up to God open that door. God never locked it in the first place. All we need to do to experience God's friendship is unlock the door and step through it. The question is, will you ever let go of your pre-conceived notions of God long enough to do it?