
Now I Call Her Friend

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Easter 6 – Year B**

Jesus said to his disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer, ...but I have called you friends.” (John 15:15)

Friends.

It was towards the end of his ministry, as he was about to face the end of his life, that Jesus turned to his followers, to those who had left everything to serve him, and he said, “I do not call you servants any longer. I call you friends.”

Surely, at the beginning, the followers of Jesus were overwhelmed by his power and wisdom. Apparently, it took only a few seconds for Peter and Andrew and James and John to drop their nets when Jesus first said, “Follow me.” They did follow him, and they witnessed signs and wonders. They heard wisdom and truth. They saw people healed and made clean.

But, apparently, it took a while before Jesus called them “friends.”

One of the early heroes of my ministry was the old Baptist renegade minister, Will Campbell, whose story would take dozens of sermons to tell. But he was the first person I heard give this definition of a friend. “A friend,” he said, “is someone you’ve spilled a lot of salt with.”

It was only later that I learned that that definition was spoken earlier by Don Quixote, “A man must eat a peck of salt with his friend, before he knows him.” In fact, the saying was probably first delivered by Cicero, in the first century, CE; “Trust no one,” he said, “unless you have eaten much salt with him.”

All these definitions of “friend,” carry the same meaning. A friend is someone with whom you have passed a lot of time. You have spent so much time that you’ve eaten a lot of salt together. You have done some great and memorable things with that person, but you’ve also spent time doing nothing at all. You have simply hung out, bided time, chewed the fat. Friends are the people you have travelled with, people you have journeyed with.

Friends are people we have spilled a lot of salt with. We have not only eaten salt together, but we have spilled salt. In fact, we have spilled more than salt. We have spilled wine and beer. We have spilled our lives. We have sometimes spilled our gut.

So it was with Jesus. It was after Jesus had travelled with his disciples, after he had journeyed with them, that he called them friends. He had confided in them; but he also knew, undoubtedly, that he would be betrayed by them.

Friendship, then, is not just about sharing glorious moments together. Friendship is also the capacity to share embarrassment with each other. Friendship says that I will continue to claim this person as friend even when he has messed up, and even when she has let me down. And when I have let them down.

A friend is someone who continues to walk with you, continues to journey with you, continues as a companion with you until you both know that your journey is holy, touched, sanctified by God. A friend is someone you can be so truthful with, that it hurts. And that hurt becomes holy when it is shared.

During this quarantine year, many of us have shared a lot of hurt with each other, with our friends, and certainly

with our families. With our children, with our mothers and fathers, those we have been stuck together with. We've shared a lot of salt. We've spilled a lot of salt.

Today, when so many people in this country observe "Mother's Day," I remember particularly what a woman told me one time about her mother. "I used to call her mother," she said, "but now I call her friend." Those words reminded me of what Jesus said to his disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer, but I have called you friends."

I know that many of us enjoy beautiful relationships with our mothers; and I also know that many of us have complications with our mothers! In either case, however, on this "Mother's Day," it is worth pondering the friendship role of healthy mothers.

This past week, the Church celebrated the feast day of Dame Julian, Julian of Norwich, who teaches us much about motherhood. She was a mystic, Julian was, of fourteenth century England. She ended up living and counseling from a small room, a cell, they called it, attached to the local church. Maybe it was kind of like teaching from a "quarantine cell," if you will. From her prayer and devotion emerged beautiful words of comfort, including the gentle line: "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Lady Julian, too, spoke the deep and gentle words of a caring mother.

Julian of Norwich is also known for her provocative vision of God as Mother. In her mystic sight, Julian realized that "God is as really our Mother as he is our Father" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 59). Indeed, Julian would go on to say that, Jesus, too, is our Mother. She said, "Jesus Christ who sets good against evil is our real Mother. We owe our being to him—and this is the essence of motherhood." And later: "So Jesus is our true Mother by nature at our first creation, and he is our true Mother in grace by taking on our created nature" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 59). What is amazing that these were not the words of a new age feminist; they were the words of a fourteenth century woman of prayer!

Think of what our gospel truth might say, if we truly allowed ourselves that kind of imagination, the imagination to consider that God is our Mother. Jesus might have said, not, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30), but "The Mother and I are one."

Yes, on this Mother's Day, of course, we give thanks for all the various mothers in our lives: our mothers, our grandmothers, our godmothers, our step-mothers, our stand-in mothers, our foster mothers, our living mothers, and our deceased mothers, our graceful mothers, and our even our disgraceful mothers. We call them lots of things, usually good things! And we give thanks for mothers.

But I give thanks for something else on this Mother's Day. I give thanks that so many children have discovered their mothers as their friends. "I used to call her mother. Now I call her friend." The same goes for fathers, too.

It may be the best thing we can ever call our mother or our father: "Friend." It comes in a mature stage of life, a stage that occurs after the strained years of childhood and adolescence, when both children and parents are learning how to grow up. After that maturity, an amazing glow settles on mother and daughter, and on mother and son. It is the glow of friendship, a glow seasoned with time and love.

It may be that the ultimate purpose of motherhood is to be a friend. And it may be that the ultimate purpose of fatherhood is to be a friend.

It is surely true that the purpose of being God is to be friend. Yes, the purpose of God is to be our friend. That is why Jesus tells his disciples that he no longer calls them servants; he calls them friends.

God wants to be friend to us. I don't mean "friend" in a sloppy way. And I certainly don't mean friend in the virtual "Facebook" kind of way. Becoming a friend to someone is much more than a click on a computer keyboard.

No, being a true friend to someone takes time. A friend is someone with whom you have spilled a lot of salt – salty food and salty tears.

A friend is someone with whom we have been in quarantine together. A friend is someone with whom you have travelled together. Just as mothers and fathers and children have travelled together. Just as Jesus travelled with his disciples, so God wants to travel with us. It is when we journey with God, when we are honest and truthful with God, when we share our pain and suffering with God, when we share our joy with God, that we become friends with God. And I believe that is God's desire, too: to be our friend, to travel with us.

Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, in the twelfth century, AD, wrote one of the Christian masterpieces on friendship. It was titled, "On Spiritual Friendship;" and he wrote that true friendship is a virtue, so great a virtue, in fact, that it leads to unity with God. Friendship, true friendship, is a way of knowing God.

Finally, at one point, Saint Aelred suggested quite simply that, "God is friendship." Not just "God is Love," but "God is friendship."

God is friendship. When we cultivate friendships, when we risk embarrassment and betrayal and honesty with friends, when we dare to call someone our friend, when we are willing to travel together with someone, when we are willing to spill things with someone, we are very close to loving as God loves. We are very close to God.

Today, Jesus calls his disciples "friends." And he has called you and me to be friends, too. That friendship is the very love of God.

Amen.

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