



*Friends with God*

5/9/21: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Mother's Day

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

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)

May Your Word only be spoken; and may Your Word only be heard: in the Name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

The fall after I graduated from college, I returned to my high school in Baltimore to teach history. It was a wonderful opportunity to be back in the place that had been a place of comfort and success. It offered me a chance to be student again. This time though, I was learning to be a teacher. One of the things I had to learn to do was to call my teachers, now colleagues, by their first names. It had been one thing to call my principal and college counselor "Stan the Man" behind his back, as an impudent high school senior. All of us students used nicknames for teachers. But it was quite another to be expected to address Mr. Johnson as Stanley, a colleague, and dare I say, a friend—or his sake and as well as for mine.

Friendship is not typically something we talk much about in church or from the pulpit. Though there are exceptions, it hasn't figured prominently in the way Christians have thought about God. But for me, the past year has caused me to think more deeply about all kinds of relationships, and the meaning of the friendships in my life. I imagine the same is true for many of you.

And in fact, our Scriptures are full of references to friendship. There are: Naomi and Ruth, from the Book of Ruth; there are David and Jonathan in the First Book of Samuel. There are Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar friends of Job, who weren't very good friends, if you recall, in that they told him that he must have done something wrong to be suffering so.

The books of Proverbs and Psalms contain aphorisms about friendship. "A friend loves at all times," (Proverbs 17.17) or "Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of a friend springs from their heartfelt advice." (Proverbs 27.9) Psalm 55 describes the bitterness of betrayal by friends: "Had it been an adversary who taunted me, then I could have borne it....but it was you, a man after my own heart, my companion, my own familiar friend (Psalm 55.13-15)

We get some hints in the Hebrew Bible of human friendship with God. For example, in the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom is personified as a woman who, "in every generation passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets." (Wisdom 7.27) And there is, in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, a place where Isaiah channels God speaking of Abraham as God's friend. (41.8)

But Jesus takes friendship with God to a whole new level. Jesus calls his disciples "friends." And I believe he invites us as well to imagine him as our friend. He is asking us to imagine a different kind of relationship with God, one that replaces distance with intimacy, one that replaces guardedness with candor, one that replaces fear with love.



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In his book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis takes a philosophical look at four words and concepts of love that influenced the world of the Bible, though only three of them actually appear in the Bible:

Eros is the first of these. The word doesn't actually appear in Scripture, though examples of it are all over the place. It is sexual love between two humans; it is in good part a biological drive, though of course it has cultural components. It's not so much a choice; we are often counseled to hold eros in check.

Then there is storge (stor-jay). This is a natural affinity or attachment as between parents and children, or perhaps between siblings or cousins. Again, it is not so much a choice, though for sure we make choices about how we relate to our relatives. It appears in its negative form in the New Testament, as in "so and so is lacking in *storge*," that is, heartless and without affection (Romans 1.8; 2 Timothy 3.3.)

Then there is philia: friendship love, the kind of bond that exists between people who share common interests, affinity, who enjoy one another's company. It includes fondness and affection. It is a choice; it is mutual.

And finally, there's agapé: God's love. It is unconditional. It is the least natural for us as human beings. It wants only the best for the other, without any concern for oneself. It is sacrificial. It is the love that we often associate with mothers, who are often willing to do anything for the well-being of their children. It is the love of Jesus for all of us as displayed on the Cross.

John uses these two words—agapé and philia—freely and interchangeably, and they come to together in the context of friendship that Jesus talks about. Now, I ask us to imagine God saying to us, "You are my friend. I like you. I love you. I want to spend time with you. Your thriving is what I want more than anything for you. Nothing you do can change that. And I give my life that you may have life."

In the ancient world, friendship was not primarily about who one was, but about how one spoke and especially acted. In the New Testament world of Jesus, the trick was to tell the difference between a true friend and a flatterer. Plain speech is the mark of a friend in the Gospel of John. Jesus tells his disciples everything. He doesn't sugar coat the cost of discipleship, and he backs up his speech with action. He tells them the truth, with love. There is a saying, "Truth without love, kills. Love without truth, lies." (Eberhard Arnold)

Jesus speaks the truth to us, in love, about our preciousness. And in the example of his life, lived boldly and freely out of love for us, we are shown how to live out our lives freely and out of love for one another.



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The writer Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of his rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles and says "Yes, he's very fond of me." <https://beautifulcourageousyou.com/2012/12/07/hes-very-fond-of-me/>

May we take that to heart for ourselves—God's fondness, love and friendship for us—and for one another.

**Amen.**