
Now I Call Her Friend

A sermon for Mother's Day by Dean 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 done 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.

This week, I am grateful to remember some special friends in my own life. I just returned from a pilgrimage to Israel, where I learned not only about holy places, but also about holy friends. When we travel with people, we become friends with them.

Also, this past week, I met with a colleague group, a group of men who have been meeting together for fifteen years. Sharing our hopes and our pains, our happiness and our sorrow, has made us true friends. Two months ago, I met with still another group of men who were my close friends in South Carolina, where I lived before I moved to Atlanta. When I saw those buddies again, over in South Carolina, I was amazed at how close we still are. History and time spent together has made us friends forever. In fact, we have become rather holy friends.

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 he has let me 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. But that suffering becomes holy when it is shared.

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. We call them lots of things, usually good things! And we give thanks for them.

But I give thanks for something else on this Mother's Day. Many daughters, and sons, too, have mentioned this. One of the most delightful things a child ever calls a mother is "friend." "She used to be my mother," a woman once told me, "but now she's my friend." In fact, we have all heard sons and daughters alike call their mother their best friend. The same goes for fathers, too.

It may be the best thing we can ever call our mother: "Friend." But it comes in a mature stage, 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.

I used to call her "mother," but now I call her friend. It is one of the most important things we can say. It means, somehow, that motherhood has become complete.

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 so that that person gets listed as "friend" on your Facebook page.

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 you 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, says quite simply, "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 in order to make 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, we call our mother "friend." Jesus calls his disciples "friends." And he has called you and me to be his friends, too.

That friendship is the very love of God.

Amen.

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