
God is Friendship

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

Today is the feast day of ... my daughter, Sarah! Today, January 12, is her birthday, and we keep her feast in our family today. Hooray!

But, of course, Sarah's is a local feast! In the wider church, today is the feast day of Saint Aelred, born in Durham, England, around 1109, and who entered the Cistercian monastery at Rievaulx, in Yorkshire, when he was 24 years old. In the year 1147, Aelred became the Abbot of the monastery at Rievaulx.

Aelred of Rievaulx is known for his tender, wise, and most famous work, a treatise titled *Spiritual Friendship*. He said there, in his own way, that we know the love of Christ by loving each other. Many of us have heard it said, and we have ourselves said, that "God is Love." But Aelred is famous for giving that phrase another twist. Aelred, in discussing spiritual friendship, said that "God is Friendship."

So, on the feast day of Aelred of Rievaulx, I want to thank God for friendship.

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."

Later, 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; "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.

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. But that suffering becomes holy when it is shared.

One of the most delightful things a child ever calls a parent 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 or father their best friend.

It may be the best thing we can ever call our parent: "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 parent and child. It is the glow of friendship, a glow seasoned with time and love.

During these last ten months of quarantine, isolation, and social distance, a lot of parents and children have spent even more time than usual together. It's been concentrated time, packed time, close time. Frustrating time, too. I bet a lot of salt has been spilled, together.

Oh my, I pray that you parents and children have become better friends during this tight and frustrating time. Yes, I bet we've spilled a lot of things together during these last ten months.

On the feast day of St. Aelred, who said "God is Friendship," I pray that our spilled salt together has made us better friends together. And I dare to pray that we have known God better, through that love, that friendship.

I am so glad that I can call both my daughters, and my son, my friends. And I hope that they consider my wife and me as their friends, too. Parents and children can be the best friends in the world. They can be the ways that God pours love into the world.

Finally, of course, it is God who wants our friendship, just as Jesus called his disciples "friends" towards the end of his life. God wants to hang out with us for a long time, for so long that we have spilled a lot of salt together. I do not mean a Facebook "friend," which title seems to be designated with a mere, quick, click of a computer key. Friendship, true friendship, takes much longer than that. God wants the sort of friendship that takes a lot of spilled salt together. Like parents and children. Like families. God is friendship.



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