

“I Call You Friends”
Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church
January 12, 2025

Scripture: Exodus 33:11; Isaiah 41:8-10; John 15:12-15

I. God as Friend

This morning’s sermon was initially planned for this time last year as the first of a four-part series titled “The Four Great Friendships” – exploring friendship with God, our neighbor, ourselves, and the earth. However, upon arriving here the previous December, it was evident the congregation was grappling with too much inner turmoil to dedicate a full month to friendship. Instead, I preached a four-part series on grace and forgiveness, which better addressed your needs at the time.

Today, I’m revisiting that original sermon. Choosing it as my final message is my way of saying, “Nice work, friends!” Over the past year, you’ve worked hard on forgiveness and on giving and receiving grace. Your dedication has brought this congregation solidly back on its feet. Now, on our last Sunday together, we can let our hair down a bit and have some fun.

The other reason I chose this topic is that friendship with God is a foundational understanding that undergirds all of my sermons, yet I have never covered the subject directly. Friendship with God is not simply a comforting idea; it’s a revolutionary truth. The God who created the vast universe doesn’t just tolerate us – God delights in us. Imagine this for a moment. In John 15:15, Jesus says, ‘I no longer call you servants... Instead, I have called you friends.’ This is no small claim. Friendship implies trust, equality, and joy – qualities we might reserve for human relationships but hesitate to attribute to the divine.

You’ve heard the expression, “You can’t choose your family, but you can choose your friends.” As our Divine Parent, we might dare to expect God to love us regardless of our shortcomings and failures. But this doesn’t mean that God has to like us. Our best friends are those people we both love and adore. If God chooses to be friends with us, it is for the same reason.

This idea can be very hard to accept as true. Despite our outward appearances, each of us is profoundly aware of ways we fall short in life. We’re aware of the thoughts we have that we shouldn’t, the things we’ve done that we’re not proud of, and the things we failed to do that we should have. The more self-aware we are, the more reason we have to doubt God would even love us, much less like us.

Have you seen the *Far Side* cartoon where God watches a man walking beneath a piano suspended by a rope? His finger hovers over a large keyboard button labeled “Smite.” It’s amusing, yet it mirrors the image of God many Christians hold – one who is quick to punish us for our failings. While they proclaim a God of Love – and may even call Jesus their friend – it’s hard to truly believe in that love or adoration when the same

God is said to condemn people to eternal torment for incorrect beliefs or insufficient devotion. Who among us doesn't have certain incorrect beliefs or inadequate commitment to God?

This "God of hellfire and brimstone" might attract converts and fill offering plates, but the distortion it creates is profound, like navigating a Fun House filled with warped mirrors. Jesus offers us a way out of this "Hell Hole" because he replaces our distorted images of God with his image.

I used to think the critical question was whether or not Jesus is God. Now, I'm convinced that the transformative question is not "Is Jesus like God?" but "Is God like Jesus?" That is, does the God of the Universe act in ways that Jesus acts.

I remain a Christian minister because I wholeheartedly believe God is like Jesus. Whether Jesus is divine, mortal, or both, I believe his life, ministry, death, and resurrection reveal the very heart of God. This belief has transformed my life partly because it has changed my image of God.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to address God not formally as "Father," as the English translation suggests, but intimately as "Abba," whose meaning is closer to "Daddy" (or "Mommy"). "Daddy/Mommy" hardly conveys an image of a stern disciplinarian who never thinks we are good enough and wrestles with anger management issues. "Daddy/Mommy" – 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 by meeting us where we're at, and showing us more productive uses for our anxious energies.

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*.'

In the Hebrew scriptures, only Abraham and Moses are called God's friends. The rest are servants. Yet Jesus shows us a God who seeks friendship not just with biblical heroes but with ordinary people. Like Garth Brooks, God has "friends in low places."

To tune into this God, I regularly use my imagination. I picture myself with a consciousness as loving and wise as my closest earthly friends – One who celebrates my presence despite my shortcomings, just as my very best friend would. Often, this exercise clears the "static," and I sense a Presence more aware of me than I am of myself. This Presence loves me fiercely and calls me to accountability without condemnation.

When this Presence shows up, or I "tune in" to God's wavelength, it's unmistakable. I feel not just loved but liked – and not out of obligation but choice.

Before moving on, I invite you to take a few minutes to close your eyes and try cutting through all the static by envisioning yourself in the Presence of someone or something who acts more like your best friend in the world than your parent or disciplinarian.

II. Being Friends with God

God's love is unconditional. God's friendship is not. Friendship, by its nature, is mutual. It requires consent by both parties. So, while God loves us even when we don't return the love, true friendship cannot exist between ourselves and God anymore than it can exist between two people when only one side wants to be friends. Friendship is a two-way street.

For this reason, Jesus says, "You are my friends *if you do what I command.*" This is not a statement about servitude. The commandment he's referring to is the one he just gave: "love one another as I have loved you." That's it. Effectively, Jesus is saying, "I have chosen you. You choose me back by extending love by loving others as I've loved you." The implication is Jesus will still love you if you don't show similar love to others, but you will not be his friend. How could you be when you have not chosen him as he has chosen you?

I'm reminded of an experience I had as a youth that illustrates what it is like when God chooses to be friends with us, but we don't reciprocate.

In the summer of 1977, my Boy Scout troop from Mercer Island, WA, attended the national Boy Scout Jamboree at Moraine State Park in Pennsylvania. En route to the Jamboree we took a couple extra days to tour New York City, where I purchased a giant King Kong button at the Empire State Building. I modified this button to be a neckerchief slide, which my fellow scouts thought was really cool. One day, a scout from Florida – yes, from Florida – also headed to the Jamboree, approached me and said, "That's a really great slide!"

Part of the fun of Jamboree is trading items you've brought from home for more exotic ones from elsewhere. Sensing a deal might be made, I cocked my eyebrow and asked, "Would you like it?"

"Well, yes!" the scout exclaimed, not realizing that I was setting him up to strike a deal.

"What do you have to *trade* for it?" I responded.

Caught by surprise, he paused momentarily and looked in his bag. "I don't really have anything I can trade for that ... except *this.*" Pulling out a souvenir "Florida" license plate with the word FRIENDSHIP stamped on it, he offered it to me.

"No way!" I frowned, pretending like I was offended that he'd make such a paltry offer in exchange for the coolest neckerchief slide ever. Thinking he was taking me for a chump, I said, "What else have you got?"

"I only have these license plates," he said.

“No deal!” I responded and prepared to move on.

But the scout continued holding out his license plate. “Take it,” he said.

“But I just told you I don’t want to trade.”

“Just take it *out of friendship*,” he said. “You don’t have to give me anything for it.”

This simple expression of friendship hit me between the eyes. I accepted his gift, feeling like a stingy schmuck. Nonetheless, I did *not* give him my neckerchief slide!

Yes, it’s true. This scout from Florida gave me a FRIENDSHIP license plate, and I gave him nothing in return but a weak “Thanks.”

As the Jamboree commenced, I began to regret what I had done – or rather, what I had *not* done. It was as if my failure to act in an equally generous way set a full-length mirror in front of me, revealing a cold, black hole where kindness and generosity should have been. I didn’t like what I saw.

I searched for that scout throughout the Jamboree, seeking to give him my King Kong button and several other items I’d brought for trading – gifts I intended to offer for friendship’s sake. I never found him.

When I hear Jesus saying, “You are my friends if you do what I command you,” I don’t hear some cold-hearted demand for subservience as a condition of his friendship. In my mind’s eye, I see that kid holding out his FRIENDSHIP license plate to me as a simple gift after I have refused to give him the King Kong neckerchief slide that caught his eye, only that kid is Jesus. I receive his gift without ever giving back something in return. This kid may be incredibly generous and desirous of friendship, but is this an image of genuine friendship? It certainly could be if only I’d give as freely as I have received.

Every day of our lives, God is more like that kid from Florida than we can ever imagine, freely offering us gift after gift with FRIENDSHIP written all over it. And just like that kid, God never complains if we accept these gifts without offering anything in return. God will keep sending blue skies and colorful sunsets, whether you give thanks for them or not. You’ll still find that perfect shell on the beach to claim as your own. And you will still find help coming from unexpected places when you struggle, whether you acknowledge it or not. But one day, many of us get tired of our stinginess. One day, we wake up wanting to be less like ourselves and more like God. Perhaps that’s the day we finally offer God our hearts, saying, “Take it – out of friendship.” Then, we discover the transformative power of friendship with God.

Certainly, this past year, the power of friendship has transformed this congregation. You’re a very different group of people than the one I found a year ago in December. It’s not that you were horrible people back then! You’re just a lot friendlier. Warmer. More welcoming. There are a lot more smiles on people’s faces and laughter on Sunday mornings. You tarry longer after meetings, just enjoying one another’s presence and camaraderie. You more readily volunteer to help when there is a need.

Bottom line, you remind me more and more of that Florida kid from 47 years ago, holding out his license plate just because it was in his nature to seek friendship, even with strangers. I sincerely hope I've been better at sharing my own gifts than I was back in the day!

I'm truly going to miss you, even as Melanie and I are excited for our next Call! To me, there's no better place to be than among those who take Christ's command to love one another as he has loved us to heart – deepening their friendship with each other and God at the same time. You are just such a community. I can't wait for Angela to experience the same joy I have.