

"Friends with God"

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14

James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

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First, I would like to tell you that I love scripture. To me it just makes so much sense and gives me such a direction in my life. It wasn't always that way. For a good part of my life the Bible was a book that someone else read and then interpreted for me. I grew up Catholic and so we relied on the priests to educate us on God's Word. I mean I knew the stories of the bible, but I didn't realize that it was a continuous story from Genesis to Revelation. I didn't know that there were different ways to read different parts. Some you read as poems or songs – songs of praise and songs of despair. Some of the stories were actual history – history of the world that the Israelites lived in at the time. Sometimes the stories were metaphors for life. And sometimes it was a rule book – you were supposed to do this and not this.

I became familiar with the Bible when I studied at the Seminary. That is where I fell in love with scriptures. The more scripture courses I took the more I wanted to take. The more I learned about how the Bible was written, who wrote what and which part, the more it held such a mystery for me.

Rabbi Ben Bag Bag (don't you just love that name) describes the bible like this: "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it. Look deeply into it, and grow old with it, and spend time with it, and do not stir from it, because there is no greater portion."

Turn it and turn it. You can never get too much of it; you can never stop discovering something new in it. It is like no other book ever written, or ever read. It is a mystery that just keeps on giving.

The reason I say this is because I am constantly astounded at how I can read something one day and I hear something, and the next day I read the same passage it seems to take me somewhere else completely. The readings I read today did exactly that. When I first read them, I had a tough time trying to see where they connected. What was the lesson that was in these readings? Then, I realized I was being drawn to the way Moses was praying to God – it seemed very interesting, different. He was talking to God as if he were equal. He was demanding help from God as if he were a friend. Someone who he could rail at without worry. Someone who he could speak his mind to without apology. A God who was very close by, in a very close relationship to Moses – like a friend. He wasn't whining, he wasn't pleading. No he was telling God exactly how he was feeling – alone, in need of help.

Then I remembered Abraham doing that with God in Genesis when God wanted to destroy a city because of the sinners there. Remember, he bargained, and then bargained again with God till he saved Sodom (Gen: 18:32)

Then I thought about how Jesus teaches us to call God Abba, Daddy. And we hear in John's Gospel that if we follow Jesus and his commands, he is our friend. It became so clear that being a friend with God, with Jesus, being in a close relationship with God is what God wants.

I would like to share a story from many years ago when this kind of close relationship came through my daughter. She had grown up going to church, going to Catholic Church, participating in many things with me as chaplain of a high school. I knew that she was very grounded in her faith. But it all became clear to me one day that not only was she grounded, she saw God as a friend, a very close friend, maybe even her best friend. I had been diagnosed with a serious illness when she was just 12. There was a very good chance that I might not live, and we both knew this and were trying hard to work through it. I was going to church more often; she was refusing to go at all. I was praying more fervently, and she was not talking about God or anything. One day I said to her, "I am so frightened that you have lost your faith in God because of all this." She looked at me and said, "Lost my faith in God? No, I haven't. Why do you think that?" I said, "Because you won't come to Church with me – you won't pray with me." She looked at me a little stunned and then said, "Oh, I believe in God. I know that there is a God. I am just really angry at Him right now. I am not going to his house, and I am not having him come to mine at the moment." I was a little shocked by what she said. I just sat there.

After a while I began to think that I wished I had that relationship with God. I remember when I was young, I did. But as I grew up, I felt that maybe I was supposed to be more stilted, more reserved in my prayer. I stopped seeing God as a friend and more like an employer. I mean I was working in the Catholic School Board as a chaplain so that wasn't farfetched. I realized that I had to begin to see God, Jesus not as someone I approached with anxiety but rather one I could talk to with all the emotions that I was going through.

I started praying to God like I would talk to a friend. Sometimes just talking and sharing my feelings, sometimes railing against my situation of being sick and unable to work, and sometimes angry that God had allowed this journey to take place. I mean I was very happy before I got sick. I had the job I always wanted, a daughter who was amazing, my health. And then BAM it was all gone.

I needed a friend! I needed someone who I could talk to that wouldn't give me platitudes and the old God doesn't give you more than you can handle. Oh yes he does!!!! That isn't anywhere in the bible by the way.

Do you know that the word 'friends' comes up over a hundred times in the bible: 66 times in the OT and over 30 in the NT. That's a lot. Maybe we have missed something in how God wants to be in relationship with us.

What does it mean to be a friend? First it means that we have the well-being of each other at the forefront. We want only the best for each other. We count on friends to be there no matter what. The best friends love us even in those times when we aren't loveable. Friends don't always agree with us, or give us what we ask for, but they support us even when we might be wrong. They forgive us when we admit we are wrong and want to be friends again. Friends even connect with one another immediately even if time has passed between conversations.

Have you ever called a friend up that you haven't talked to for ages and without missing a beat you are chatting away for hours? During this time of lockdowns and stay at home, we recognize how important friends are. We miss them, we want to hug them. Maybe we even think of all the times we neglected them before the pandemic and realize how we took them for granted.

Who does this sound like? Does this not sound like the God we call Jesus? Aren't we constantly reminded that "we have a friend in Jesus"?

Now think about how we pray. Do you see God, Jesus as a friend when you pray or someone more distant? There is no wrong answer to this question. I just want you to think about how you envision God when you pray. Maybe next time, and it may take practice, you can imagine God sitting beside you just wanting to chat about your day. Isn't that a great way to see our God? God so wants to be in a relationship with us. God wants us to talk to him, listen to him, have a conversation with us. I used to say to the kids in high school "what does God's voice sound like?" They would look at me like I was a little crazy – this lady hears voices - lol. But then I would say "God's voice sounds like yours. He created you; of course he sounds like you – whenever that voice, in the time of prayer speaks of love, forgiveness or compassion it is God speaking to you."

God as friend. In John's gospel Jesus tells us: "You are my friends when you do what I command."

What is it that Jesus commands? We hear that today in the Psalm and in the Letter to James. The commandments are not easy, but they really are simple. We love, we are compassionate, and we walk humbly with each other and with God. Just as we would with a friend.

This week, take time to think of God as a friend. Someone who only wants what's best for you and to stay in conversation with you. Someone that is there at the drop of a hat and has all the time in the world. That's what good friends do.