

## “Jesus As Friend”

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork  
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – February 25, 2024  
Second Sunday in Lent – Lesson: John 15:12-17

Loving God, we thank you for your steadfast grace and presence in our lives. May your Holy Spirit be felt in this place, in this community of spiritual friends, as together we turn our hearts to your guidance, wisdom, and word to us this day. Amen.

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Today, as we continue our sermon series based on Diana Butler Bass’ book, *Freeing Jesus*, we are focusing on the idea of Jesus as *friend*. In her book, Diana shares that this is one of her earliest understandings of Jesus as a young child. Like all good Sunday school teachers should, her first Sunday school teacher, Miss Jean, taught her and her peers that Jesus loved them and that he welcomed children to himself (even when his disciples tried to turn them away). Miss Jean told the kids that they would always have a friend in Jesus and could turn to him at any time. I wonder if it was the same for some of you. I definitely received that message as a child.

Young Diana had a warm and fuzzy relationship with her friend, Jesus. It came naturally. She visualized Jesus accompanying her as she played by herself in the woods near her house. And one December she moved Mother Mary and Baby Jesus from the family nativity scene into the spare bedroom of Barbie and Ken’s house because she decided that “a suburban two-story was better for Jesus than growing up in a barn.” Friends look out for one another!

We often teach children that friendship is something to value and nurture as they grow up and as they learn to befriend others at school and engage in their groups and communities.

So, to think of Jesus as a friend makes sense because friendship is one way in which we relate to others around us when we are actually doing our best as human beings.

Unfortunately, sometimes people have dismissed the name friend for Jesus as too juvenile or too simplistic. And I wonder if sometimes people are hesitant to use such a down-to-earth name for Jesus, thinking that loftier titles are somehow more respectful. Instead, I think we should reclaim the importance of friendship in our daily lives and in our practice of spirituality.

After all, the entire story of our faith is one of relationship. We might tend to think of our relationship with God as primarily one where God is creator and parent, and we are God’s creation and children. That is an important piece of the story.

But equally important is that God is seeking a friendship of sorts. Ours is a story about responding to God’s invitation to be in a mutual relationship. It is about building a loving and just covenant with God and with God’s beloved creation. And even when that covenant is damaged or broken, it is a story about mending it and rebuilding it again. That thread of covenant is woven throughout our scriptures and our history. Why not think about this relationship as true and loving friendship?

The Quaker tradition within Christianity has long understood this importance of friendship. For them, friendship is a central idea and a core value to be upheld. We may call them Quakers, but they call themselves the Religious Society of Friends. Throughout history, they have understood that all people of faith are called to be friends to God and friends to one another. And that emphasis on friendship led them to some interesting theological insights and community practices.

For one, the Quakers emphasize that every friend, every person, is filled with the “inner light” of God. No one individual has closer access to God or to spiritual insight than anyone else. That led them to establish fairly egalitarian spiritual communities where everyone had shared responsibilities. They didn’t have any clergy for a long time, though that has changed in some communities over the years. And they were ahead of their time in rejecting gender and class hierarchies within their communities.

Having experienced persecution themselves early on, Quakers also have a long history of being active in pursuing peace and seeking justice in the world, taking on issues like the abolition of slavery, women’s rights, prison reform, the abolition of the death penalty, worker justice, and more.

Perhaps a theology of friendship motivates one to build a friendlier world. If God is our friend and we are called to be friends of God and friends of one another, then friendship on a deeper and broader scale must be what we pursue.

So, I was pondering this week what are the marks of true friendship? What characterizes friendship at its best?

Maybe one way to get at this is to close your eyes for a moment and imagine your best friend or friends. What do you love about them? What about your relationship with them brings you joy? How have they been there for you when you needed them? How have you been there for them? Like any human relationship, you may have had some ups and downs, weathered some storms. If so, how did you work your way through that?

You can open your eyes now.

Maybe some specific experiences came to mind. Maybe some specific insights into the nature of friendship did too. If so, take note of these for yourself.

More generally, here are a few ideas about friendship at its best:

A true friend is someone who loves us unconditionally (to the best of their ability). Someone who is trustworthy. Someone who is willing to show up and be present, who lends a listening ear. Someone who really knows us. Someone who shares in our joys and our heartbreak.

A true friend is a kindred soul who we enjoy, have fun with, laugh with. Someone with whom we can spend time doing the things we love to do together. I don’t think we’re ever too old to need play dates with friends, by the way.

A true friend is also someone who is willing to call us out when we mess up or tell us the truth in love when we need to hear it. And someone who will respond with grace and forgiveness too.

Jesus was and is all these things and more. In the gospel stories we see what kind of friend he is.

He is the compassionate friend who weeps in grief at the tomb of his dear friend, Lazarus.

He is the inclusive friend who reaches out and befriends anyone and everyone, including those who are unpopular, cast aside, living on the margins, those who are hurting, those who are isolated.

He's also the kind of fun-loving friend who just invites himself over for dinner! And he's the friend who makes sure everyone at the party feels welcome, cared for, valued, and part of the community.

And Jesus is the steadfast friend who doesn't give up on his friends even when friendship gets harder. And he's the forgiving friend who gives second chances.

Jesus told his disciples, his friends, "love one another, as I have loved you." "You are my friends if you love one another." True friendship is grounded in love.

Jesus also said, "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." There may come a time when we need to be willing to put ourselves in danger for the sake of others, as Jesus was willing.

But, on an everyday level, this is also about how we put the needs of others before our own, when appropriate and necessary. Loving friendships shouldn't lead us to deny ourselves in unhealthy or abusive ways. But we all know that friendship does require give and take, compromise, and mutual collaboration. Friendship, even with Jesus, is not a one-way street. We are called to share the love we receive.

Friendship can feel risky sometimes too, especially new friendships. New friendships call us to be vulnerable, to put ourselves out there and risk being rejected or misunderstood. It can be hard to make new friends sometimes.

In the book, Diana Butler Bass notes that it might especially be hard for us to make new friends as adults. Kids face this challenge too, of course. But they are also surrounded by other kids much of the time at school and in other groups. As adults, we can sometimes become a little isolated for various reasons. And it can be hard to simply find the time for friendships with those who are outside of our families or workplaces. Nurturing friendships takes time and energy. Engaging in church community can help though!

It may sound a little funny, but Diana also makes the case that the advice we give kids about making new friends works for adults too. "Be yourself, welcome others, practice kindness, and

play well together.” That’s the gospel truth, right there. Jesus did those things. He taught his friends to do those things, including us.

What a world it could be! When we take that risk to extend the hand of friendship to others and they respond in kind, the bond of friendship can take root, flourish, and help build community.

Diana shares a beautiful story in her book about two kids, Connor and Christian, who met and became friends on the first day of school. Connor, who has autism, showed up to school but became quickly overwhelmed by all the activity, new people, and noise of the first day of school and retreated into a corner outside of the building and began to cry, unable to go in. Christian happened to see him and went over to comfort him. Christian reached out his hand and Connor accepted it. And together, holding hands, they walked into school together. And they have been the best of friends ever since. And I bet, over the years, Connor has been the one to comfort Christian sometimes too. Because that is what friends do.

That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? A hand reaching out in friendship. Sometimes we’re the one reaching out like Christian and sometimes we’re the one receiving like Connor. Hands offering help, kindness, service, care. A wave hello. A handshake of welcome. A pat on the back. A high-five of joy or solidarity.

Jesus, our friend, extends his hand to us in this way. We can trust that the one we call Christ, the one who showed us the depth and breadth of God’s love, is still that kind of friend for us. Still reaching out. Still showing up in our lives in love.

And we can learn from Jesus’ model for friendship and be that kind of friend for others. Our call is to be the hands of Christ reaching out into our world. And, in doing so, our circle of friends is ever-expanding to include not only our nearest and dearest ones, but our community, our country, our world, all creation... until none are left whom we call stranger, but all are friends.

Amen.