

9 May 2021
The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Friends of God in Jesus”

Text: John 15:9-17; 1 John 5:1-8; Acts 10:34-48

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] **Alleluia.**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends.

Jesus calls His disciples friends. *Marvel at that, please.*

And let’s think a little about friendship today. And not the virtual kind, where being friend only means agreeing with that person and hitting a button on a computer, but *true* friendship, which seems to be a lost art today. A rarity these days, in a dog eat dog world, a selfish world, a “get all I can” world. *True* friendship, which is personal, which gives of yourself for another.

The government does not call you friend. You are taxpayer, citizen, subject, voter, but not friend. The government makes laws and expects you to follow them. It has law enforcement for you if you don’t. And if a politician does something for you, it’s likely not because you’re a friend, but because he or she wants your vote, or a donation.

You may be friends with your boss, but at work, he is the boss and you are the employee. What he or she says goes, and you are expected to do what you are told.

Pontius Pilate, you may remember, wanted to be in the exclusive “friend of Caesar” club, but that was not easy, or cheap. He’d have to earn his way in, and the Jewish leaders were threatening to torpedo that if he didn’t crucify Jesus for them.

And some of you will remember when Bill Clinton was in the White House, there was a group of people calls FOBs - for “friends of Bill.” People who had donated enough to his campaign that they were given the favor of staying in the White House and sleeping in the Lincoln bedroom.

Friends today aren’t what they used to be, and people are suffering for it. In this world today there are the haves and the have nots. Those above and those below. The high and the low. The rulers and the ruled. Masters and servants.

And Jesus has turned all that completely upside-down!

For in Jesus, the one above all has come down to us. In person. The Most High has become the most low. The Ruler of all has put Himself under the Law. The Master has become the servant. All for you. He was born not in wealth but in poverty, as one of us. He lived not a life of privilege but of service. And He laid down His life - not because He needs your vote, your service, or your money - everything is His and whatever you have came from Him! There is nothing you have that He needs. But everything you need He has. So Jesus laid down His life for you, to provide for you. To give you the life, the forgiveness, the love, the future you need. But this too: **to make you friends.** *His* friends. More than mere servants, subjects, workers, creatures, or disciples (followers). But friends of God.

Marvel at that, please.

For by nature sinful and unclean, you are by nature an enemy of God. And born dead in your trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2), there is nothing you can do to earn or deserve friendship with God. But as Paul said to the Romans: *Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Romans 5:6b-8). Christ didn't die for His friends for their weren't any to die for! So He died for His enemies. To give us life and make us His friends.

And you are, because what God calls something, that *it is*. God calls what is not into existence through His Word. And so if Jesus calls you friend, *you are*. Not because you have done it, earned it, or deserved it, but because He has gifted that to you.

The Jewish leaders noticed this about Jesus, and didn't like it one bit! He should be *their* friend, not the *friend of tax collectors and sinners* (Matthew 11:19). But He keeps hanging out with them. He keeps forgiving them and eating with them and rejoicing in them. But that's not the way it works, Jesus! They have to change. They have to become friends of God and then *maybe* God will help them. Jesus isn't doing it right! God would never do such a thing.

But it's *exactly* what God would do. And *did* do. It's not Jesus who needs to change, but us. It's not Jesus who is upside-down, we are.

So in His death and resurrection, Jesus sets things right again. He does what a friend does. The one who is life dies, that those captive to death might live. The sinless one becomes sin, that those filled with sin might be righteous. The Son of God is forsaken by His Father, that we who are estranged from God might be His friends. And it is so. The empty tomb the proof that death did not win. The empty tomb the testimony that sin is

overcome. And the empty tomb our joy, that the one come to be the *friend of tax collectors and sinners* is alive and still befriending sinners, hanging out with them, forgiving and eating with them, and rejoicing in them.

For that is what Jesus does here. He comes, as John says, *by the Spirit, the water, and the blood*. Speaking to us and forgiving us by His Word, befriending us with the water of His Baptism, and sitting at Table with us, the Table with His Body and Blood for us. The Spirit working through all of these means to give you what you do not have, to make you what you are not, to overcome that which had overcome you. For Jesus is *the one who has overcome the world*, and by faith in Him - that is, the gift of new life and forgiveness we have received from Him - that victory is ours. And so we, too, have overcome the world and the ways of the world. To live right-side-up in an upside-down world. **As friends of God.**

Friends who don't just know God from a distance or through a computer, but know God personally. The God who came to us as a person. And still is. The God who speaks to us in the Scriptures, as friend, that we know Him. For the Scriptures aren't God's rule book. They're not God saying "Do this" because I said so! Because I'm God, I'm the boss, I'm the authority. That's what some people think, and so "friend of God" is a very foreign concept to them. So if they want to be a friend of God they must follow the rules; they have to be good and earn it.

But how did Jesus really use His authority? We heard Jesus speak of that that two weeks ago, actually, on Good Shepherd Sunday. He came into our world with the *authority to lay down His life and take it up again* (John 10:18). To die and rise for us. To be our friend - *for greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*. But His love is greater, God's love is greater, because He did it to *make us* His friends. And this is what He has been teaching His disciples all along. Servants do not know what the master is doing or why. They just obey. But Jesus has made known all He is doing and why, to *make us* His friends. And if you hear all the Scriptures like that, you begin to have the mind of Christ. To see things in a new way. To see others in a new way. With *no partiality*, as Peter learned. But to see others - no matter who they are or what they have done - as those for whom Jesus died to make His friends.

And with such a mind, such vision, such faith, such a love received, such a joy given, we abide in that love and love one another. **Because that's who you are.** We show we are friends of the one who befriended us by befriending others. As His life and love and joy abide in us.

And when those things don't . . . when by our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires we show that friendship with the world is more important to us than friendship with God . . . that's when Jesus' friendship shines brighter than ever. Because it's not one strike and you're out - or even two, three, or seven (Matthew 18:21) - but forgiveness as great and as

limitless as the cross. For if you could discover a sinner too big or a sin too often committed for the cross, then you could worry; *should* worry. But what is greater than the God of the universe, the God who created all things, the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God, the alpha and the omega, without beginning and without end, laying down His life for you? You got a sin bigger than that? . . . I didn't think so.

So when you fail, when you fall short, when your sinful and worldly thoughts, words, deeds, and desires get the best of you, when your friendship runs cold or you put it in the wrong place . . . the one who calls you friend *still does*. He doesn't unfriend you! He instead says to you I forgive you, My friend. Take and eat, My friend. Go, you are free, My friend. I don't burden you with commands, I set you free to live a new life. To overcome the world by faith - the faith that receives from Me this new life and friendship that now lives in you, My friend.

Marvel at that, please. Friend of God.

For it really is quite extraordinary. In a world that more and more seems to be overcoming the faith, Jesus says it is our faith in Him that overcomes the world. In a world more and more hostile to God, Jesus is still calling tax collectors and sinners His friends. In a world more and more going its own way and accelerating away from God, Jesus calls us to try a new way. Which is really not new at all, but old. His way. The way of love. How He created things in the beginning, before we were injected with a lethal dose of sin and death. So Jesus comes to make all things new again (Revelation 21:5). To make you new again. And again and again. To live a new life. To live an old love. As His friends. And you are. Because He said so. And what He says, happens. What He says, is. And one day He will say rise, and you will.

For **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*]

And so your life, dear friends of God, will never be the same again.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.