

**“God Our BFF”**  
**May 17, 2009**  
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In our Prayer Group on Monday afternoons, we follow a five step prayer procedure. I outlined it during a previous sermon. Do you remember the steps? You can remember them by using your fingers. On the off chance that some of you may just have forgotten them, I will go through them again. You begin on your thumb with naming God—that is, calling God into the prayers in the way you need God to be for you in that particular time of prayer. Next, you proclaim God’s work in the world, history and/or your own life—you point these things out with your pointer finger. This is followed by giving thanks. Like your next finger thanksgiving is right in the middle of everything. It is also your longest finger, so it cues you to let your prayers of thanks go on for a while. This lets you properly cultivate gratitude for God’s many gifts. Your ring finger follows and reminds you to pray for those with whom you are in relationship—family, friends, and even those people with whom you struggle. The final, and smallest, finger represents prayers for your personal needs. It may be the smallest finger, but the hand doesn’t work as well without it. Prayer for our self is integral to all the steps.

Almost every week a few of us meet and pray our way through the five steps together. Each time the prayers flow in different ways. We have become sort of like jazz musicians: week to week the same notes emerge, with similar tones, but the final result is always unique. Other members of the group may have a different experience of this, but to me the part which varies the most is the first step: naming God. Some weeks we call God traditional names like Savior, or Father. Some weeks we get more poetic and name God as shaper, or molder, or dancer. Sometimes we mix them up. Every week it is a little different. It seems like we could spend the rest of our lives coming up with names for God and never come to an end.

I have been getting this feeling from the Lectionary lately, too. The weekly selection of readings which preachers turn to for possible preaching texts has provided us with some very different names for God of late. On the first Sunday in Easter, we heard of God as the Risen One, through the resurrection of Jesus. This description was built upon in subsequent stories of the resurrection during following weeks. Two weeks ago we heard God named as the Good Shepherd, again through the work of Jesus. Last week, the Gospel of John—although I did not preach from it—referred to God as the Vine Grower, Jesus as the True Vine, and believers as the branches of Christ.

Each of these names gives us different ways to think of God and Jesus. By calling Jesus “Risen One,” we are reminded that death and suffering hold no ultimate power over either Jesus or us. When we name God or Jesus as the Good Shepherd, it evokes tender care and protection of humans as the activities of God. Naming God as Vine-Grower, Jesus as the True Vine and ourselves as the vine branches speaks to our connection and interdependence with God and Jesus. This variety of names for God is absolutely necessary. God is too big to fit into our preconceived notions of who God is and how God should be, even though we name God with familiar and knowable titles. We need to draw on a large variety of names for God in order to

remind ourselves that just when we think we can wrap our minds around God, more to the picture will emerge. So, we are well served by the Bible passages of the last few weeks providing us with different ways to name God.

This parade of names for God continues with this week's reading when Jesus says:

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my *friends* if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you *friends*, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.<sup>1</sup>

I bet you're thinking "where is the name for God in that?" It bears a little explaining. When Jesus calls the first Disciples *friends*, he is also calling himself their friend. While masters are in an unequal relationship with their servants, friends are on equal terms with one another. There is an implied intimacy between friends. Also, whatever we may personally think of the relationship between God and Jesus, it is abundantly clear that the author of John's Gospel believes them to be one and the same. This is true despite Jesus' regular use of the term "Father" for God. Remember, John's Gospel begins with that famous poem: "In the beginning was the word"—that is to say, Jesus—"and the Word *was with* God, and the Word *was* God."<sup>2</sup> So, when Jesus names himself us as our friend, he is also naming us as God's friends.

I can understand God as Risen through Christ...sort of, anyway. I can see God as a shepherd to us; I do feel cared for by God. I even have a sort of grasp on the idea of God growing us as vine branches of Christ; even though that gets a little weird if I think about it too long. But God as our *friend*—what's that all about?

Like the other names of God we have been turning over, it is easy to want to understand it as a metaphor—as an example that points to a deeper truth, though it may not be literally true. After all, God is not literally a vine or shepherd, right? And I know that I don't relate to God as I do to other friends. God has never come over for a barbeque, or gone to a movie with me as far as I know. At least not in the ways my other friends do. I certainly never got a text message from God signed "Your BFF," which, in case you don't know, is slang for "Best Friend Forever." So, how do we make sense of this idea of God as a friend of ours?

Today's passage offers some examples of what friendship with God, Jesus and one another involves.<sup>3</sup> Let's begin by looking at what may be the most famous part of this passage: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>4</sup> This passage is often quoted to remind us of the crucifixion. While I believe that the idea of self-sacrificing love is profound, and an ideal to which we are certainly called as Christians, I think it would be a mistake to only understand laying down our lives in that way. For one thing, I do not think that the path of

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:13-15.

<sup>2</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> The following examples, and some of the subsequent observations, are lovingly borrowed from Barry Chance, <http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/04/may-17-2009-john-159-17-barry-chance.html>.

<sup>4</sup> John 15:13.

martyrdom is expected for every church member. If it were, the church would rather quickly cease to be, instead of continuing to preach the Gospel to the world. As friends of God, we are asked to offer our lives to others, not simply as sacrifices, but also as gifts. We are asked to help others to feel God's abundance through offering generously of the gifts we have received. After all, every gift comes from God, so why not share those gifts with others?

As Christians we are called to open our lives to God, and one another. This implies that honesty, transparency, and being forthcoming, are part and parcel of what we do. This is certainly something which Jesus modeled for each of us. Jesus made known to the disciples everything that he heard from God<sup>5</sup>—through his teachings, living his life, his crucifixion and resurrection. So, we, too, are asked to share our gifts more fully with Jesus, God and others—however we are able; in the big ways and the little ways; in *all* ways.

Another important aspect of our friendship with God is that we have work to do in God's name. Jesus said "I appointed you to go and bear fruit."<sup>6</sup> We heard a similar directive in last week's reading, which read in part: "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."<sup>7</sup> Both of these writings from the school of John depict love as an action. Our command is to bear the fruit of love because loving others helps us to better love God and our selves. While it is stated as a command, it is also a profound gift to us—a chance to be in right relationship, and taste of God's presence through our own actions. In so doing we help one another to blossom and bear fruit as God's children.

We are called to lay our lives down for one another—to open our lives up fully so that we are as available to one another as God is to us. So, that the next time we are at a barbeque or going to a movie and wondering why God hasn't showed up, we can remember that God lives in the people around us. Those moments offer us opportunities to love our friends like God and Jesus love us, just as we are commanded to do as Christians.

The blessing of God's presence goes further. Our good and loving God is at work even when others are not present. In all of our own terrible, lonely times of loss or isolation, God is there. In our moments of heartbreak and doubt, God is there. Not passively observing. Not condoning our wishing sorrow upon us, but sharing it and helping us to bear its burden. God is there in our hard times luring us to reconnect with all those people in all those places where our souls sing and our hearts dance, and we remember that we, too, are loved by God and others. God calls us to abide there in *that* love which completes our joy, and transports us from being servants of God into being friends of God's. Not just employees, but co-conspirators in love, and grace and joy. God calls us to that place where we name God not only as Father or Master, but also as our friend. As our constant companion and inspiration, God is not just *a* friend, but our best friend forever.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> A paraphrase of John 15:15 d.

<sup>6</sup> John 15:16 c.

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:21

**John 15:9-17**

9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 12"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.