

DIVINE FRIENDSHIP

A few weeks ago, I received a text message from a friend of mine. She said, “Maybe we should talk”. I texted her back and said, “That’s fine, I’m free all day today. Call at your convenience.” Sometime around noon that day she called me and said, “I’ve been sensing that you’re growing more distant. What’s wrong? Did I do something to offend you?”

I was floored when she said that. She had totally misperceived the situation. I started to worry, because I was wondering what might be happening. Was I inadvertently sending out that signal? Is she just the kind of person who is insecure and reading something not there into the friendship? I don’t know. What I know for sure is that there was no problem in our friendship from my side of the equation.

The good news is that we patched things up. Things are back more or less to normal; our friendship is back on track, and we have a new understanding that will, hopefully, prevent this from happening again. However, this incident got me thinking.

We’ve been looking at different images of Christ the last few weeks. This week I want to look at the image of Christ as friend. Christ himself uses this image in John 15:9-17.

Friend is a term that we throw around rather casually these days. We even have degrees of friendship. We talk about “close” friends, passing friends, and acquaintances. Those gradations have to do with how much of our lives we’re willing to share. What does it mean to say that Jesus is our friend?

To understand that I think we have to go back to look at the ancient context and see what friendship meant in the Ancient World. Perhaps the most influential person to define friendship in the Ancient World was Aristotle. There were really three kinds of friendships defined by Aristotle.

The first friendship is what we might term *superficial* friendship. It’s what we might call an acquaintance. You are friends with a person simply because you enjoy their company. There is no great expectation of reciprocity. You don’t really expect to gain anything from the friendship. You just enjoy the person’s company, so you hang around them. I’m sure that many of the people in the ancient world had these kinds of friendships, just as we all do today.

This is not the kind of friendship, though, that Jesus means. How can we tell? Because Jesus goes too deep with the disciples for this to be the case. They were not there to have a beer and watch the ball game. It’s reasonable to assume that if the friendship were superficial, the conversation between the parties would be as well. This is not the case in this story.

The second were friendships that were considered to be useful. One source I read calls these *political* friendships. If you want to understand this type of friendship, I suggest you watch the movie *The Godfather*. The movie begins with a wedding scene, and you see many

people caught up in the festivities, but Don Corleone is not there. Instead, he is receiving people who are there to ask favors from him. When they address him in Italian, they call him patron, which of course, means “patron”. One man, a mortician, is criticized by the Don for not showing the proper respect.

This is essentially a window into the way that the Ancient World worked. Everything that people valued- employment, status, wealth, power- all came from having the right patron. Even Caesar was, in essence, a godfather. He was a giant patron. So, to call oneself a “friend of Caesar” was to make the claim that you were a client of Caesar. It meant that you had done something for Caesar in the expectation that, at some point, Caesar would remember and return the favor.

The third kind of friendship is what we would call a close friendship. This is called fictive-kin friendship by anthropologists. That means the parties treated one another as though they were members of the same family. This is what Aristotle has to say about this kind of friendship. “We define a friend as one who will always try, for your sake, to do what he takes to be good for you. The man towards whom many feel thus has many friends; if these are worthy [people], he has good friends.” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.5.16) I should explain also, that when Aristotle talks about worthy people, he means one who has an honorable status in the eyes of the community.

This is the kind of friendship that Jesus is offering. The political friendship was always a hierarchical relationship. It is clear that one party in the relationship has more status than any other. One person is the patron; the other person is the client. I have to say that one of the theological problems that I have with this passage is that the Sovereignty of Jesus Christ is a cornerstone of our faith. I expect any relationship between Christ and human to be a Patron/Client relationship.

That’s not what happens here, though. Like it or not, Jesus sets a fictive kin paradigm on their relationship. Jesus may be the older brother, but they are still family. Jesus himself levels the playing field. Jesus says, “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” Jesus makes his servants into family.

So, what does this friendship with Jesus look like? Jesus says two things that are important here. The first thing that strikes me is what may be the most direct statement that Jesus makes in the gospel. Jesus often speaks cryptically- either in short, poetic aphorisms or in parables. This time, however, Jesus gets straight to the point. “You are My friends, if you do what I command you.” Being a friend of Jesus means following his commandments. A short time later he gives his most well-known commandment of all. “This I command you, that you love one another.”

The second direction that Jesus gives us on being his friend takes a little more imagination, but still not much. He says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you, and

appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain..." One defining characteristic of a friend of Jesus is that friends of Jesus bear fruit. They are not passive. As my dad would say, "They have no flies on them."

Jesus is out there, brothers and sisters, and he wants to be your friend. Not so that he can control you; not so that he can make a slave of you; what he wants is to build you up. As Aristotle put it, he wants to do what's good for you. What does it take to be a friend of Jesus? It's not that difficult really. Obey his commandments, especially the one about loving others, and you can be his friend. Go out there and bear fruit for the Gospel. That's not as hard as it sounds. It's a matter of finding what the Holy Spirit is calling you to do and then rolling up your sleeves and getting to work. Remember, Jesus doesn't call you slave; he calls you friend.