

In my first experience at Ashland Seminary several years ago, the worship team there introduced me to the song we have just sung: "I am a friend of God." I sang the song but for some reason it felt awkward. It was like the song was putting words in my mouth that I questioned my right to sing. If the song had said I want to be God's friend or if the song had said God is my friend it would have been easier for me to sing. This would have been easier because I would like very much to be a reliable friend of God and I do believe that God is my friend in the sense that He is always looking out for me and wanting the best for me. But to sing flat out that I am a friend of God, and to sing it over and over again, well that felt somehow too presumptuous. How can any human being, especially one so weak and sinful as I know myself to be, claim without reservations to be God's friend? What right do I have to say, "I am a friend of God"? Perhaps some of you felt the same way as you were singing or listening to that song? It's too strong, too much; it feels like we are over reaching our bounds.

This is the same sort of awkwardness we sometimes feel when we are talking about the tension between God's immanence and God's transcendence, or when we are talking about the contrast between God's gentleness, on the one hand, and His severity on the other hand. We encounter the same feeling when talking about whether we should love God or fear Him and when we are trying to figure out how the answer to both possibilities is "Yes." It's the same thing when we are talking about the tension between God's mercy and God's justice. Or, how can Christ become wholly human

and remain wholly God as the ancient creeds insist? All of this is pretty deep water. And to speak of God as being too near, too gentle, too loving, too merciful, or too human seems--well--too risky. How dare we speak in such familiar terms? It sounds and feels theologically blasphemous. How are we to address this dilemma?

It seems to me that for the Christian the dilemma is resolved in Jesus Christ our Lord. We first recognize that He was lambasted by the Scribes and Pharisees for confessing an over familiarity with God. They wanted to know, "How can any man call God Father?" John 5:18 says, "For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." The Jews were scandalized at Jesus' familiarity with God.

But not only does Jesus refer to God as His father over and over again, going so far as to address Him with the familiar term "Abba," which is akin to our word 'Daddy,' but Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the same way. He spells it right out: When you pray say, "Our Father in heaven . . ." The Apostle Paul makes it clear that I am not reading something in here that doesn't belong. In Romans 8:15 Paul says, For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." And in Galatians 4:6 Paul says, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." I John 3:1 exclaims, "How great is the love the

Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

If this seems too familiar, what we need to recognize is that in Christ what was distant has been brought near. Ephesians 2:13 says "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." In Christ, the immanence of God has over shadowed His transcendence, His gentleness has overcome his severity, His perfect love has dispelled our fear, His mercy has triumphed over judgment. All of this was accomplished on the Cross when Jesus took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. God's justice was satisfied when Jesus was stricken, smitten, afflicted, and pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Isaiah says that the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and that by His wounds we have been healed.

Thus, Jesus told his disciples in John 15:15 "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." In Today's English Version, Romans 5:10 is translated, "We were God's enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son. Now that we are God's friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ's life!"

What does it mean then to say that we are friends of God? First of all it means that we must give up any notion that this friendship has been earned or attained

by our own achievement. I think that's what once made it hard for me to sing, "I am a friend of God." I knew myself to be a sinner and unworthy of such an intimate designation. But this is where we encounter the Good News: Paul tells us in Titus 3:5, "It's not by works of righteousness that we have done but according to His mercy he saved us." And, I John 4:19 says, "We love him, because he first loved us." We become friends of God by God's work not ours.

Secondly, we gain access to God's work and to God's friendship by believing in Christ and in what Christ has done for us on the cross. James 2:23 says, "And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend." We become God's friends by believing in the offer of friendship He extends to us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ His Son. Ephesians 3:12 says, "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."

And, thirdly, we enjoy God's friendship by walking in obedience to His commands by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. 1 John 4:13 says, "We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." And, I John 4:17 says, "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him."

So I would have you know this today: Regardless of where you've been or what you've done in your life and regardless of how many times you've tried and failed. If you receive by faith that Jesus paid the price for

your sins, put your trust in Him and seek to live by His Spirit within you, you are a friend of God and you can say without hesitation or embarrassment: "By God's grace, I am God's Friend."

We call the feast of the Lord's table, "Communion." It is at this place and in this way that we celebrate our most intimate friendship with God. Jesus said, "No greater love has a man than this that He would lay down his life for his friends." John tells us at the end of John 13 that Jesus, now showed them "the full extent of His love." Jesus offers us union with Him by offering us His body and His blood. He offers to enter into us and to make us one with Him. He says "Eat this bread; it is my body broken for you." He says, "Drink from this cup; this is my blood poured out for you." It is His offer of friendship to us, today and forever. All who eat and drink from this table with faith in Him are friends of God. We are the friends of God.

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Sermon for October 2, 2011

Friends of God

John 15:9-17; James 2:23

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