

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, November 19, 2017
The Rev. Dr. David Thompson
“Can you be a friend to God?”

It was Monday morning and John was in the cathedral praying. "Oh God, please help me. I'm in terrible trouble. My business is making heavy losses; I owe \$100,000 to my main supplier; the CRA is demanding immediate payment of my last two years of tax; my wife Gloria is about to leave me..." Just then, John heard the man in the next pew praying, "Oh God, please help me. I'm really in trouble. My older son is about to marry the wrong woman; my younger son is on drugs, my unmarried daughter is pregnant; my wife wants a divorce"

John took out his wallet and removed \$100. He then turned to the other congregant and said, "Enough already of your complaints. Here, take this money and go away. I need God to concentrate solely on me."

Old Testament text: Abraham believed God...and he was called the friend of God.

New Testament text: Jesus said: "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 I have heard from my father."

Picture for a moment befriending someone very powerful. Let us also suppose that you are financially Middle class, that you have a good education but are no genius, and that you have a number of psychological challenges. You however decide to befriend a multi millionaire, or to make the point harder the Queen of England or a very famous and wealthy movie star. Did you ever ask yourself "How is this friendship going to work? What would be the challenges? What about the power imbalance in the relationship? How would that work?"

Now picture for a moment attempting to befriend God- the most mysterious powerful being who created all things, including you! How is that friendship going to work? Is it even possible? What is God going to need from you? How could you ever meet God's needs, supposing God had any? Isn't it arrogant in the extreme to think that we could befriend God? Isn't God, by definition, without needs? What about the power balance between you and God? God has infinite power, we are mere mortals. How is that going to work? Wouldn't our friendship with God just be an anthropomorphic projection, wishful thinking at best and just delusional at worst? What do you think?

Richard McKean was a world war two veteran and he taught his son this now famous quote about friendship: "True friendship can only be found between equals. It cannot spring from pity, remorse or the desire to protect. It is tough as whip cord, hard as diamonds and as fragile as

crystal. There is respect in it, the ultimate respect that refuses to tamper with another's spirit. And yet cordiality that has no difficulty dispensing sympathy and a helping hand to a friend in distress." He says that true friendship can only be found between equals. Is that true?

There was a high school principal who had a friendship with a student named Becky. This was an extraordinary friendship between this principle and a ten-year-old girl. They were by no means equal in power. He was the Principal and she was a student! He had life experience. She was just beginning. In what sense could it be said that true friendship between equals was present? Tragedy occurred and little Becky passed away. At her funeral the Principal was asked to speak. In his remarks about Becky and his obvious high regard for her he spilled the secret of the equality.

The Principal respected Becky and she respected him! Both respected each other within the roles they each were playing. Both refused to tamper with the other's spirit or to diminish it. The Principal was not Becky's equal, but he did not use his power to diminish Becky in any way, rather he nurtured Becky. Becky for her part understood the role of the Principal and helped him to fulfill it when it came to honest respectful feedback. Hence, they were good friends!

Many friendships suffer because they spring either from a desire to protect, or from remorse or from pity. Frequently the spouses of alcoholics or families of alcoholics or substance abusers fall into this trap. It is also a common pitfall for social workers, H/R professionals or health care professionals to say nothing of clergy. But co-dependencies based on pity always diminish another's spirit. What is wrong with these so-called friendships? There is no equality of respect in pity. There is no equality of respect in remorse. There is no equality of respect in dependency.

The best of friendships occur when we are there for each other in tough times. Sometimes when our families desert us a good friend becomes our family. When everyone deserts us can we expect God to be our friend and help us pick up the pieces of our lives?

Let's be sure that the person who is to become a genuine friend must be encouraged to stand on their own two feet. Dependency is not friendship, it is dependency. Pity is not friendship. It is pity. Remorse establishes an inequality that must be made up. Remorse asks that things be made even again. That is not friendship. There must be equality of respect in true friendship. If there is a tilt to the pool table, you can't play billiards!

Now that I have run the pool table, I want to return to our question. Can you have a friendship between you and God? First, there is this challenge of a huge difference in power. Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher, used to say this about God's power: That Omnipotence draws its power back so that we might have freedom in our spirits. Obviously, God could choose to dominate us, forcing us to do God's will, but then we would all be like Robots, not free beings. But look around you. Are we not incredibly free? The amount of freedom given us is awesome; danger is absolutely real; life is uncertain and there are no guarantees! We could stabilize the world or blow it up with nuclear fission. Oh yes, we are awesomely free!

But there is another possibility we need to think about concerning God. Perhaps God is just a little like that principal with Becky. Perhaps in God's love for us and our friendship with God there just might be equality of respect, for respect is a gift that can freely and be abundantly given to anyone especially God. I am talking about the kind of respect that refuses to tamper with another's spirit or diminish it in either word or deed.

I have a friend who I love deeply. This friend has been badly hurt. He had faith before a tragedy took place. Not afterwards. The pain of the loss shattered his faith. This person has returned to a Godless and purely scientific view of the universe. He now asserts that there is no outside intervention of a loving God in human suffering. People, he says, delude themselves that God intervenes in their lives. In fact, he says, it doesn't happen. There is a scientific explanation for everything without the need for a Deity. Tragedy alone, he says, is sufficient reason to dismiss the Deity, never mind other cogent arguments that could be made. Face it, he says, we are alone in the universe. Friendship with God? That is human projection, a vain wish...something not real.

In the New Testament there is a fascinating parable told by Jesus. It is all about friendship at midnight. You live way out in the country. You have someone arrive on your doorstep late at night and they are starving! You have no extra milk or bread. But you do have a friend and so you drive over to their place even although it is past midnight. You knock on the door and the dog starts to bark its head off. Finally you get a response at the upper window of the farmhouse and a bleary eyed head sticks out and says "What do you want?" And you tell him and he says "Go away! I have gone to bed. You will wake up the kids!"

And Jesus says: "If he doesn't give it to you out of friendship, the shamelessness of the request, your persistence in the request will be enough to get him up and give it to you." And Jesus says that if a human being friend of yours will eventually do the right thing for whatever reason...how much more will God do the right thing? And then he makes one of his oft repeated statements about God: "Ask and you shall receive, Seek and you shall find, Knock and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds. To the one who knocks the door will be opened."

Perhaps you have an atheistic brother or friend or spouse. What can we say to them? Where do we begin?

The book of Hebrews says: "It is impossible to please God without faith, since anyone who comes to God must believe that God exists and is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him." If you are an atheist this seems like a catch 22. For the Atheist wants to be able to find God with out faith. God should be a brute fact like gravity..discoverable, available to science and with no need for faith. But this Great Being, according to the Bible, simply does not operate like that. We must begin with faith in order to get to God. Jesus says we only need a little tiny bit of faith to move forward- just the size of a grain of mustard seed but we need at least that...a tiny, tiny bit of faith. That is the path; like it or not the Deity is not changing that just for you. Faith is a given like gravity; we need it before we can even begin. But with that grain of faith the promise is

to seek, knock and God WILL respond. And that is the testimony of those who believe. It is my experience that when we take the leap of faith we don't fall into an abyss. We are caught by God.

Now to the verse with which we began. The stories of Abraham in the Old Testament are remarkable for Abraham's relationship with God. It is a back and forth relationship based on respect and courtesy. God and Abraham go back and forth over Sodom and eventually Abraham influences God to spare Lot. Abram is willing to obey God even to the point of sacrificing his own beloved son. It is a friendship tested in the fire and it is one of a deep mutual respect. That is why it is so fascinating to read that in the New Testament James says that Abraham is a friend of God. Notice that Abraham does not attempt to diminish God's spirit in any way.

For most of us what we like to get from God is our outcome! God is supposed to do what we want. But Abraham surrenders his idea of a good outcome and leaves it in the hands of God after putting his point of view forward. That is profoundly respectful to God. Do we do that? Do we not have our own secret version of the Lord's prayer? "Let our will be done on earth and yours be done in Heaven!"

We are so often about control aren't we? I read a statement the other day that said: We are all control freaks. We want what we want. And if we could, we would like to control God. God however does not seem interested in being controlled. In that respect God is a lot like us. Perhaps that is part of being made in God's image. But in fact, no one gets to control God and that is as it should be. The buck in the universe has to stop somewhere! Jesus who has a deep friendship with God refers to Him as "Dear Father" out of the knowledge of his personal relationship with God. He says out of his experience; 'Knock, ask, seek and expect to receive.'

But Jesus also does what Abraham does with the Great father/Mother Creator God. He gives respect to God and does not diminish God's Spirit or seek to control God. So, when we ask and seek and knock we have to do one thing: Let go of the outcome! Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane leaves the outcome to God. Not my will but thine be done he says. It is the same in his famous Lord's prayer. We do so out of respect to God. We assume respectfully that God knows best. We also let go of outcome because we would rather be God's friend than anything else in the whole world. Demanding our outcome would diminish God's Spirit. Refusing to diminish God's Spirit in any way is how to be God's friend. That is what Abraham knew and Jesus taught us. It is called ULTIMATE respect!

Jess Stearn, an award winning reporter, got to be with General Eisenhower at a public event. He had developed a rapport with the great man over the years. At the same event, were two non-commissioned officers, a sergeant and a corporal and they asked General Eisenhower for his autograph. They were terribly excited. They each had a slip of blank paper in their hands. They were so nervous that their hands just shook. Stearn could hardly blame them. They were confronting the most famous soldier in the world; their Commander in Chief. They saluted the general and he saluted them back. They said "General, would you be so kind to autograph these slips of paper for us? We would greatly appreciate it."

The General held out his hand and scanned the slips, turning each of them over. They were blank. The sergeant proffered a pen for the general's signature. Stearn says the general ignored the pen and scowled. His lips twitched and the cords in his neck bulged. He kept looking at the slips as if he couldn't believe what he saw. He had been so obliging just a moment before says Stearn that I expected him to dash off his signature with a smile. Instead he stiffly handed back the slips unsigned.

"You men should know better" he said in a rasping voice, " I could have you court marshaled for giving a blank chit to a superior officer for his signature." The two men seemed to shrink into the ground, "Consider yourselves lucky you're not held for discipline." They slunk away like whipped dogs.

Stearn was stunned by this turn of events and as he watched them draw off he sympathized with them, every step of the way. His surprise must have been apparent to the General, for he turned to Stearn and said "You didn't like that did you?" Stearn hesitated and then said "You were their hero General!"

The general gave Stearn another look. "You know that was a serious offence. Anybody could put a command over that signature."

"I'm sure you are right General" Stearn said without enthusiasm.

Eisenhower paused and then spotted the two noncoms retreating with their heads down.

"Men" he said with a voice that could have cleared a canyon, "Men come back!"

Stearn could see the fear in their faces.

"Let me see those slips again. I am staying at a hotel" he said, pointing to a building. "Leave your slips of paper with the desk. Tell them to see they are delivered to my quarters, after you put your names on them."

He smiled, "Make sure they are not blank," he paused. I will sign them, and leave them at the desk in your names." He saluted them smartly.

Stearn said he had never seen two faces undergo such a transition so quickly! They stood stiff and erect as if they were an elite corps.

"Thank-you sir!" they said in chorus.

He dismissed them with a friendly wave of the hand.

Stearn and the General watched them move off. They appeared to be floating on air.

The General looked at Stearn and said with a grin "Satisfied?"

Stearn said he took a deep breath. What the General had done meant more than he had realized. For the General had been Stearns's hero as well.

He said " I am sure General, that you will one day be President of the United States." And Stearn said "And so he was, for eight friendly years!"

What had happened in this story?

The power between the General and the non coms was far from equal. But when the General saw Stearns's reaction to his decision, he saw that what he had done diminished the spirits of his men. Stearn saw right away that his recovery was a true act of friendship.

If we all at New St. James today could learn this kind of friendship; to enlarge another's spirit, to encourage one another at the deepest level, if we could seek to enlarge God's own Spirit through Love and respect which are also infinite, I believe that we would receive in return, God's friendship and respect!

That friendship would be the greatest experience we could ever know here on earth, far surpassing any other experience.

Abraham was a friend to God, because he respected God and God respected him! And God returned that respect and listened to Abraham's point of view. Amazing! We can experience that too!

If we ask respectfully... Knock respectfully... seek respectfully... we will receive... We will find, and the door to the most precious relationship of all will be opened. Our lives will become charged with infinite amounts of meaning and we will encounter a Mysterious, Loving Reality. Who wraps our lives in a warm cloak of care. Our hearts will fill with the deepest gratitude. For in my experience, to be loved by God as our friend, is to be drenched in GRACE!