

I'll bet if I say "friend" you can immediately recall adventures with your best pal from decades ago, or maybe just last weekend. Maybe there are stories you tell on each other, and you both get a big laugh out of them. Books and TV and movies try to relate tales of friendship, and the good ones, or the successful ones, the ones that last, are those that make us want to be friends with the characters. Maybe you like "buddy" films, like the old Bob Hope/Bing Crosby road movies; or perhaps "Thelma and Louise," or maybe "Dumb and Dumber" is more to your taste. My favorite art or entertainment friendships are 1) Huck and Jim, rafting down the mighty Mississippi, the story told with various escapades; but it's more than just fun, the white boy comes to love the black man and sees him as his equal or even perhaps his superior, and learns that friendship, like all great things, costs something- like the rearrangement of one's mind to tear down prejudices. And I especially like 2) Andy and Barney in Mayberry, where in every episode it seems, Barney must find inside himself some hidden power with which he is able to meet the demands of friendship or duty, with personal sacrifice and unexpected courage and humility, as Andy sort of patiently guides him along or waits for him to do the right thing. And 3) Ethel was always swept along into Lucy's schemes, her

caution never enough to halt or redirect Lucy's ambition. But their friendship always overcame their disagreements or pettiness. Like Episode #69, when Lucy is able to talk her way into singing a duet with Ethel as the closing act in the Ladies' Club Talent Show. But when they enter the stage from opposite sides to perform their number, they discover that both of them are wearing the same dress, the dress that each assumed the other would take back to the store and exchange for another. So in anger- while they sing the song, "Friendship"- one friend reaches across to rip off the corsage from her partner's dress, and the second friend tears away the other's sash, and then a sleeve, and so on. Brilliant comedy, but by the end of the show, they are best friends again.

We all have our valuable friendships, and friends become important as we share something with each other. Sorrows or struggles as well as joys, because laughter and fun times aren't enough to seal a friendship- perhaps that is one meaning of verse 9, the injunction to mourn and to weep. Friends will, rather, be able to help one another laugh through the difficulties and the fears and the doubts of life. Maybe that is why reunions can be such good experiences. Those are friends from long ago- and more than mere nostalgia for old times- they have shared the worries and labors, and now we can laugh with one another at them. It

is part of the meaning of funerals; a gathering of friends to remember, to bear the weight of grief together, and to laugh and hope. I am glad the Old Testament lectionary reading was from Proverbs 31, where verse 25 says, “She laughs at the time to come,” words I read at my grandmother’s funeral. Our religion always calls us to such a hope among our friendships and within our fellowship.

And our religion always reminds us of the truest friend.

There is One who defines friendship. Who understands the price of friendship. He is the loyal one and the brave, the patient, and the sacrificial One, to our selfish and weak and cowardly and impetuous. He is the knowing and wise Jim to our innocent Huck, Andy to our Barney, Ethel to our Lucy. He knows our sins and hardheartedness, but he also knows our pain and our longing. The ideal place to see that kind of friendship is in Jesus’ life, the way he shared the bitterness of a suffering and lonely life, and shared the joys of a life in touch with God, and in contact with others at their important moments and decisions. And we can see the depth of his friendship in the manner of his death, that he was willing to pay the penalty of our separation from one another and from God; on the cross, showing the world what is required to re-connect. “Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend,” Jesus has told us. At the cross is

friendship of such power that it calls us to emulate him, and which also succeeds for us as a perfect act of friendship that draws us together despite our different backgrounds and colors, likes and dislikes, and accents. And it draws us to God. His friendship recreates friendship with God.

“While we were enemies we were made friends with God by the death of his Son.” What more meaningful word of love and grace has ever been written? And our passage echoes this statement from Romans 5. “God gives grace,” verse 7, so here offered to us is friendship with God. It is much more than what God demands of us; *it is what God wants with us. God desires friendship with us.* Again, we see that at Calvary where the Great Friend was obedient even to death, and so calls us to emulate the humble power of that obedience which makes us friends with God. Friendship with God means loving God, because God has loved us; and loving God always means loving others, because God loves them, as well. Friendship with God means obeying him, but not simply because God commands it, not because some old leather-bound book contains all these strictures and warnings, but because God wants to be friends with us- isn’t that the most amazing and beautiful concept in the whole world? Shouldn’t that change everything about how we live and why? God wants to be our friend, and the way we maintain that

friendship is by obedience. Not tedious, adding-up-the-rules obedience- hoping it's enough to get by- but joyful, enlivening obedience. Don't let these troublesome words from verse 9 confuse you- their meaning has another aspect.

Simply this: as friends we don't just do what God commands, but what God wants.

And so, if Jesus is our friend and God the Father is our friend, what do you think we should be to one another? Did I hear someone say "a friend"? And friendship wants the best for its friend. And so, when you hear about another Christian who puts demands upon you to think like he thinks, who insists that you act as he acts or vote as he votes, he is not your friend, but wants power over you wants you to obey him and maybe, or maybe not, obey God. He may be correct in his assumptions and choices, but friendship is not domineering. Friends do not command or issue ultimatums, friends love and share, friends learn and grow together. We are friends of God; but we cannot dictate the form or manner of another's friendship with God, because Jesus has made us God's friends, and not our own talents or strength or goodness. Am I so righteous that I possess the only path to God? Do I dare think that others are more wicked and more wrong-headed than I, that Jesus couldn't befriend them? What great, prideful evil lies in hearts

that think so. We cannot demand, we may only demonstrate what friendship with God means.

God's call comes to us all, and comes to each of us. It is the voice of a friend, rather than the order of a tyrant. "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you." Already God is close at hand, and he pours out his grace upon the humble.

In the midst of disagreements and dissensions, what verse 1 calls "wars and fightings," we must come together in friendship, because God has brought us together as his friends.

I was looking over the paper the other day, and on just the first couple of pages, I found such items as the funeral in Cameron for a soldier who lost his life in Afghanistan; and a 14 year old boy who threatened to kill his teacher if she didn't raise his grades; an article about the discovery of infectious bacteria in the sand on the beaches of Florida and along the West Coast; two stories about the floods in Turkey and Senegal, where hundreds have died and perhaps tens of thousands have been evacuated; stories of bombs in Iraq that damaged a religious shrine and killed four people, and a car bomb in Kashmir, in India; and still more drug murders in

Mexico. It is a world boiling over with anger, and reeling from pain and loss and uncertainty. Maybe here is where we can find the meaning of verse 9, “Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection.” Shouldn’t our friendship with God, be strong enough or devoted enough to destroy our constant seeking after selfish pursuits and shallow amusement? It is too easy to think we’re all right just by being here this morning, or to be so quickly self-forgiven by our excuses and half-truths. Or by the way we deal in morality and piety, but tend to ignore the real commitment in loving others for the sake of Jesus Christ.

I don’t mean to preach at you. I guess I am preaching to the comfortable self-satisfaction that has invaded much of American Christianity. Rather, this, that friendship with God is a Christ-like attitude, a humble confidence in God’s mercy and love- for all people, and an open heart, and a willingness to befriend others and yes, even to suffer with them, to love and not to judge.

God’s calling to his friends means precisely this; and also, the hope and the trust in God’s friendship so that we may all together “laugh at the time to come.”