

*July 9, 2017, Proper 9*

*Sermon, Holy Spirit, Cumming*

How do you relate to Jesus? How do you understand who he is and what that means for you as a person of faith? In the language of the church, in the liturgy and the creeds, we most often call him “Lord, Savior, Son of God.” In the language of the New Testament, Jesus most often called himself the apocalyptic term, “Son of Man.” In our own personal experience of faith, I imagine there is a range of terms we use and ways we relate to Jesus’ resurrected presence among us.

In the Gospel for today, there is an unusual way that Jesus describes how others talk about him—“a friend of sinners.” Thinking of Jesus as a friend is not beyond our common imagination. It is found in at least two popular songs. The first is the refrain from The Doobie Brothers popular and soulful hit song:

“Jesus, he's my friend; Jesus, he's my friend... He took me by the hand; led me far from this land... Jesus, he's my friend”

The second is from an old camp song lyric:

“What a friend we have in Jesus... All our sins and griefs to bear... And what a privilege to carry... Everything to God in prayer.”

Both songs capture at least part of what this way of relating to Jesus means for people of faith.

You see, at some level, we all need is a friend. Most of us have at least one good friend. Some of us have many acquaintances. But who is that person you would call when tragedy happens? Or when you are sad? Or you feel like you are at the end of your rope? Think for a moment-- because that person is your friend. Not necessarily the biggest party animal or most outsized personality. Rather the person you can count on when you need someone to be there for you. That friend for all of us is Jesus.

In today’s Gospel, that term is used by Jesus as a way his opponents criticized him because of the people he would be a friend to—sinners. You see, it is easy to be friendly with the rich, powerful, and successful. As the verse from Proverbs states it, “Wealth brings many friends, but a poor man’s friends desert him” (19:4). Being a sinner is another aspect of how we relate to Jesus as our friend—who we are as well as who he is.

There is another term used to translate the Greek word for sinner-- “outcast,” i.e., someone on the margins of society. We can think of the range of people who might fall in that category today. But to make our relationship with Jesus as friend more meaningful, it might help to think about ourselves that way, too. Most of us feel like an outcast at some time or another in our lives—we lose our job, we lose someone we love, we lose our confidence. That

does not make us sinners, of course. But it can make us feel outside the normal things of life. We feel alone. That is when we need a friend like Jesus.

Jesus offers us a way to become friends with him in the second part of today's Gospel. It is among the better known of his sayings, an invitation to relationship for all of us for all time:

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Jesus' offer of friendship is perhaps different from our common cultural understanding of being friends. It is not just about having fun and hanging out, though that can be part of what we enjoy in Christian community. Jesus' offer of friendship contains two main aspects—someone with whom we can be honest about what troubles us; and a relationship that can both help us with our burdens and provide an inner strength so that we can live and flourish as people of faith. So how do we begin that type of relationship with Jesus in the real world?

It begins with understanding our burdens—where does it hurt? Sometimes our burdens are so obvious and so painful that we cannot ignore them. For us in those seasons of life, know that Jesus is our burden bearer. Through faith and prayer and in community with other friends of Jesus, we have a way to find help. It is rarely instantaneous and easy. No. But like a good friend, Jesus waits to listen to your heart, embrace you through his Spirit and his people, and hold you as you grieve and express whatever burden you carry with you.

For some of us, our burdens may be more hidden. There is pain. It is expressed from time to time, maybe in unhealthy ways. To find the source of the pain requires some honest and deeper reflection. After doing that work-- perhaps with a therapist or priest, and always with prayer and personal appraisal-- we can eventually identify our burden. It may be a pain from childhood or adolescence that was never acknowledged and then we attempted to cover them up with achievements or addiction or some other way to try to get rid of our burden. Once we know where our pain comes from, we can deal with it more honestly and pursue a new way to live.

Because as we bring our burden to him, our friend Jesus gives us two promises. First, that he will give us rest. He says that two times in the passage we just heard. In my experience, there is no better gift for a person in pain than simple rest, a time to let things go, even for a while. This rest may result in more and deeper sleep. It may be a sense of peace when we are awake and feel comforted by the presence of loving friends and a loving God. Jesus promises us rest.

The second promise offers a different way of being friends. In our lives, we may have had a human friend that is not only fun and supportive, but a good example. Whenever we are with that person, we feel better about ourselves and believe that if we can be more like our friend, our lives will improve. Jesus is that friend for all of us. In the Gospel, he uses the image

of a yoke to describe that part of our relationship. It is a vivid image that might seem strange and could be misunderstood.

A yoke is a way to join together two oxen for work. At times, a younger ox will be paired with a mature ox to learn the way to follow. For our lives, Jesus is a friend, a yokemate, that teaches us how to live. Through prayer and study of the Gospels in community; and through our sacred imagination and the power of God's Spirit; we can connect with Jesus and learn how to live differently. That connection helps us to forgive people who hurt us; to be kind to others in practical ways; and to watch our words so that we don't hurt people. This learning helps us to be a good friend to others like Jesus is to us.

Today, if you have not already, I invite you to believe that Jesus is your friend. Those burdens in your life that you may try to hide or excuse or ignore can become a way to connect with Jesus. Honesty about our burdens is a way for us to draw closer to Jesus versus a barrier that causes us to stay away. For Jesus is a friend to sinners, to outsiders, like you and like me. In the Gospels, he seems to prefer their company so much that his opponents brought it up as a criticism. But if we are honest and real in who we are, and come to him by faith, then Jesus will prove he is a friend to us. He will give us rest, blessed rest; and the grace and guidance of his yoke so that we are transformed into true friends to others like Jesus is to us.

Amen.