

Freeing Jesus

Chapter 1: Friend

The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

–Luke 7:34

“Miss Jean, my favorite Sunday school teacher, held up a picture of Jesus surrounded by children. He seemed to be laughing, and boys and girls were sitting next to him or on his lap and hanging around his neck...’Jesus loves little children...He will always be your friend.’”

Jesus loves me, this I know,
for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong;
they are weak, but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
The Bible tells me so.

“That song was the first theology I learned. Jesus loved children, and he was a loyal friend, one who protected those he loved. We sang that song in Sunday school and at bedtime. I sometimes sang it in the bath or while walking to school. ‘Jesus Loves Me’ was the soundtrack of my early life.”

While “friend” seems like a simple and noncontroversial way of understanding Jesus, it is often ridiculed not only by those outside the church and also some inside the church as well. “I have heard famous preachers and theologians explicitly attack the idea of Jesus as friend as juvenile and instead argue for a more ‘mature’ Jesus.”

However, the Bible makes it clear that friendship with God is a great gift. Two of Israel’s greatest heroes, Abraham and Moses are specifically called friends of God. This phrase occurs not only with the giants of Israel like Abraham and Moses but throughout the Hebrew Bible. “Friendship with God is not a biblical side story; rather it is central to the promises and faithfulness of being a called people, in which we are friends, companions, intimates, siblings, and beloved.”

“Early Christians, most of whom were Jews, knew all this and extended the idea of divine friendship to Jesus. The New Testament vividly recounts the closeness of Jesus’s circle of friends, women and men transformed through their relationship with him.”

“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 that I have heard from my Father.”—John 15:15

“Imagine how Jesus close followers felt when they heard those words for the first time... They had come to suspect their companion was something more than a regular friend—a great rabbi, a spiritual healer, a mystical prophet, the Son of God. That last one made no intellectual or doctrinal sense to them. They were Jews, and there was only one God. Yet this friend of theirs knew and loved God more intimately and more uniquely than they had ever imagined possible.”

“Jesus brought them to the very heart of God and then revealed that God’s heart longed for friendship.” And “not just to special people of the past whose names were recorded in sacred memory, but to the ragged fishermen and curious women, sitting around him listening to his tales, trusting for the first time that the God of Israel had not forgotten them, souls broken under the weight of Roman oppression, suffering under imperial slavery. They were not slaves, not even servants. They were friends of Jesus, friends of God.”

“The story of the New Testament is that the risk of friendship is *the* risk that frees us from fear and reshapes our lives—it is better to go together than to go alone. Jesus befriends us, opening our hearts to genuine love and the capacity to forgive each other, welcome all, and act justly in the world.”

“Friendship makes us different from the person we would be if we were alone, and, I daresay, it makes Jesus different as well, for friendship is mutuality, shared vision, and affection. Some versions of Christianity insist that Jesus is immutable, but if Jesus invites us into friendship, how can that be?”

“Friendship is not just for friends. Friendship is for the good of the world.” True friendship has the power to change the world. Human beings joining together with God and each in true friendship unleashes the transformational energy of God’s cosmos that brings “freedom and equality for all in beloved community. The friendship of two changes little; the friendship of many changes everything. *I have called you friends.*”

Questions for Discussion

What do you think of the idea that Jesus is a friend? How do you understand this and what does it mean to you? Do you think of Jesus as your friend? Why or why not?

How do you understand friendship and what does it mean to you? What is the difference between an acquaintance and a friend? How has friendship impacted your life?

Studies consistently show that many adults have few or no true friends? Why do you think friendship is difficult for adults? What are the implications of this for our society?

What do you think of the Diana's statement that friendship is not just for friends but for the good of the world? What does this mean to you? How can the act of friendship change the world?

What did you learn?

What questions do you have?