



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Face to Face Shoulder to Shoulder Kirkin Sunday 662021

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

I'm sure that you have read many articles about how this pandemic has been a mixed blessing for some of us. And for some of us, this has provided us with an opportunity so that we could spend some time in reflection. But I am not one of those people. This past year and a half has been one of constant pivoting, a bit of anxiety, and a lot of unprocessed experiences.

And partly that's because I've been so busy, just trying to keep things going. But partly, the reason I think it happens to me and maybe many others is that as much as we would like to think that self reflection requires simply time and space. In fact, self-reflection, those times in which we are by ourselves, thinking through our memories and our experiences and trying to come up with something productive out of it. Self-reflection requires community that even when we are most alone, we need somebody else. And that community is made best I believe when the interaction is not merely screen to screen, but face to face and shoulder to shoulder.

Last year, we had a wonderful webinar with the New York Times columnist, Charles Blow. And one of the things I asked him towards the end, I said, what can a church do that no other place can do. Why is church special? And he said to me that churches are places of congregation. People gather together, and there is a kind of friendship that breaks out in churches and a kind of ability to say to somebody who's struggling, you come over, sit next to me. Let's walk with this together. It's okay if you cry, there's only us here.

And I thought about that this past week as I was trying to struggle through the reading today from the Gospel of Mark. Because in many ways, the Gospel of Mark here has a moment in which Jesus is not at His best. By that I mean not that He has lost His temper or something very human like that, although there are probably places where Jesus does that too. But that answer He gives to the charge that He has a demon inside of Him doesn't quite hold water. Jesus says to them, "A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand." And quite frankly, I know a lot of dysfunctional kingdoms. I don't know about you, and they seem to persist for generations.

And then Jesus says something about sinning against the Holy Spirit, which has caused undue anxiety among generations, upon generations of Christians. And I just can't believe that the spirit that comes from Jesus is one that would draw some kind of line in the sand - that when you cross it, you're gone forever from His graces. But in fact, what Jesus is doing in today's gospel is He's trying to speak about the urgency of friendship and why friendship is important.

And this comes out in the midst of a crisis. His brothers and sisters, His family, even His mother are telling Him that He's lost His mind and they're trying to bring Him home. And Jesus rejects what a sociologist would call these natural relations in favor of elected relations. Relations that you choose - friendships. And He says, my brother and my sister are those who do the will of God. And so a substratum in today's gospel, lying beneath the arguments that are happening is a kind of invitation for us to see friendship with God as the key to the work of the Christian life. As the key to the church as what makes us special.

St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, which he wrote some time in the mid to late 13th century has a passage in it, in which he uses the term, *amicitia Dei*, friendship with God or friendship of God, or even friendship in God. And it's there that Thomas says that when we come to church or when we go and invest ourselves in the spiritual life, it isn't a one-way relationship. It's not that our desires, hopes, and dreams are somehow projected onto God. But rather that we are invited into a relationship of mutuality. Into a relation, a friendship.

And over the past year, I've been thinking a lot about friendship. And I had this past week, a kind of moment in which the different traumas of the year suddenly resolved. And I saw things differently. It was at my father's funeral. And I was with my family and we had counted really carefully to stay within the mandates of the diocese to have only 10 people in the pews. And I was sitting right over there and I was ready and kind of a little bit on edge and a little bit anxious, and frankly in shock. When powerful things happen to me, my emotions blow like a fuse. And I ended up just doing the next right thing. It's actually a great thing to have if you're a rector, but it's a kind of debilitating thing to have if you're a human being.

And so I didn't know what to feel at that moment. I was in shock and suddenly this scruffy construction worker looking kind of guy came in and sat behind me and I thought it was one of the construction workers that had gotten lost on his way to the restroom in the church. And I turned around and he pulled down his mask and I realized it was my friend Oren Goldenberg, an artist in Detroit. We had done some work together.

I said, Oren, we have kind of limits of space. He said, yeah, I'm Jewish. What are they going to do to me? And I was so touched. Of course I had the friendships that I had come to rely on over the past year, the friendships of my clergy, colleagues, of the staff, of the parishioners. I had incredible gifts that someone

sent me after I preached a sermon about shaving my father two weeks before he died, a friend of mine sent a beautiful set of shaving - a razor and some blades and some shaving cream to me.

But the fact that Oren came to that funeral and was there, it made all the difference in the world. And it happened so quickly and I didn't have time to process it. It wasn't until I got to this week where I had a moment. And I called them up and I left a message for him. And I said, that meant the world to me. Thank you for your friendship. So friendship with God, I believe it lies at the heart of the Christian life and friendship with God is what we celebrate today when we lift up all the ways in which this church has been present. In fact, I think you can use that concept of friendship with God as a way of negotiating and seeing all the work of the Christian life.

Sometime in the late fourth century, Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote in a letter this:

"If poverty pinches, if grief saddens, if physical pain unnerves us, if exile darkens our lives, if any misfortune fills us with foreboding, let there be good people at hand who know how to rejoice with them that rejoice and to weep with them that weep, who are skilled in helping words and conversation, then in large measure those bitter trials we experience are lessened. The heavy burdens are lightened. The obstacles are met and overcome, for God by His spirit affects us in and through our friends."

In fact, I want to say even something deeper, I want to suggest to you. That friendship with God is something of a lens through which we can read the scriptures. Our reading today from Genesis, is that not a description of a broken friendship? God goes walking in the garden in the cool of the day, an intimate act of incarnation and He discovers that His creation, who He brought forth and love are hiding in shame and have disobeyed and broken trust with Him.

And Jesus, Jesus has come to re-establish friendship with God, to replace that broken relationship with something even more powerful based in grace. And so we read in our readings from 2 Corinthians, which have been given to a congregation that had been struggling with dysfunction and disagreement over issues of money, power, and sexuality. Paul writes them so we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. This is an assurance that the resurrection of Christ and His Cross have created the conditions for a friendship that will never end.

The art I have before you today is on the front page of your bulletin. And we're going to show it for you who are at home. It's by Agnes Martin, she is an incredible artist. Go online and type in "friendship." She painted this in 1963. Martin was born in Canada. She struggled with mental illness her entire career.

She somehow flourished among the abstract expressionists of New York City. Very much a solitary woman in a man's world at that time.

And she would do these grids in her paintings, but she also was not as impersonal as the others. She saw painting as a way of experiencing spiritual transcendence. She was a follower of Emerson and she believed powerfully in his view that we are all just particles waiting to join in this great oversoul of the world. And that connection with one another was a petamus for Emerson in friendship.

And so this painting has in it just layers upon layers of gold leaf and it shimmers when you walk up to it. And the grid behind it, of the lines there that might suggest to you bricks. But I want to suggest to you that it represents the fact when it comes to friendship, we're all in the same position. None of us has any advantage when it comes to being a friend, none of us has any natural predisposition to be a friend to someone else.

In a quote attributed to Emerson, which I think goes with the grain of this painting, Emerson writes the following:

"The glory of friendship is not the outstretched hand, not the kindly smile, nor the joy of companionship. It is the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when you discover that someone else believes in you and is willing to trust you with the gift of friendship."

Dear ones, Christ has come because He believes in you and has trusted you with the gift of friendship. How can you be a better friend? How can you know the friendships surrounding you always, not those that you have chosen, but those that God has given you? And what does it mean to be a friend to another in church, in life, in God?

Amen.