

Jesus: Friend and Teacher

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 13, 2022 – Lent 2

Texts: Luke 7:36-50

Jesus has been my dearest friend for as long as I can remember. That's probably why Diana Butler Bass' book *Freeing Jesus* struck such an immediate chord with me because her experience of Jesus was so very similar to mine. She describes herself as a lonely, solitary child who first came to know Jesus as friend. This she learned from her first Sunday School teacher, Miss Jean, who taught her that Jesus was her friend, that Jesus loved her. She learned to love the Jesus of the song, "Jesus loves me," which formed the foundation for her entire journey of faith. Same for me, song and all.

I vividly remember my first experience of Jesus as my friend. I was the youngest child and only daughter of the family who literally lived in the big white house on top of the hill in our small town just outside the city limits of Pittsburgh. Sheltered and over-protected by two parents and two older brothers, I did not have any friends my own age as a child. I remember being very sad one day when I was about four and telling my mom how much I wanted, needed a friend. That's when she taught me the truth on which I have literally built my life. My mom replied, "but you do have a friend! Jesus is your friend and he's the best kind of friend because he's always with you." I was totally confused. I knew who Jesus was but I couldn't see or touch Jesus. I couldn't invite him to my birthday party or ask him to ride bikes with me. Or could I? My mom, bless her heart, give me the simplest of answers that still astonishes me in how profound it was. "Of course you can invite Jesus to go anywhere with you. When you ride your bike, Jesus rides with you. When you go to school, Jesus sits right

beside you. When you lay down to sleep at night, Jesus stays with you, keeping watch. That's what my mother told me and that's what I believed, right then and there. It was literally that simple.

As I made my way through Sunday School, all those stories about Jesus weren't about some strange guy wearing funny clothes and sandals all the time. They were about my friend. I learned from Jesus my friend that people could be, and often were, just plain mean. But I also learned that anyone could change because people in the Jesus stories did change when Jesus became their friend. People like Zacchaeus, the "wee little man" who was the despised town tax collector and yet Jesus invited himself to this man's house for dinner! I remember when we learned that story and the other kids were confused by it, or worse, bored by it. Not me. I knew Jesus liked Zacchaeus because he knew he needed a friend too. So many of the people Jesus encountered in his life were outcasts, the kind of people no body wanted to be friends with because they were sick or weird or poor or whatever. None of that mattered to Jesus because Jesus always saw other people, especially the people around the margins of life, as people in need of a friend and as people beloved of the God who created them, just as they were.

Butler Bass reminds us in her book *Freeing Jesus* that the concept of being friends with God as the foundation for an extraordinary relationship with God is an ancient Hebrew tradition dating all the way back to some of the earliest stories in the Torah. She observes, "two of Israel's greatest heroes, Abraham, the father of faith, and Moses, the liberating prophet, are specifically called friends of God."¹ She goes on, "friendship with God is not a biblical side story; rather, it is central to the

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, ©2021, Harper One, p. 3

promises and faithfulness of being called a people, in which all are friends, companions, intimates, siblings, and beloved.”² This is why, Butler Bass argues, so many of the stories about Jesus are centered on his activities with people he saw as being his friends. His disciples counted their friendship with him as so transformative that they literally gave up their lives to follow him.

Butler Bass even suggests that the prayer we think of as the “Our Father” or “the Lord’s Prayer” came about because Jesus was introducing his friends who were the disciples to his other friend whom they knew as God. What an astonishing idea! And how much more deeply touching and meaningful it is to pray this prayer addressed to “Our Friend in Heaven..”³ instead of Our Father in Heaven. Try it and see what I mean! As Butler Bass notes, this approach to prayer “collapsed the sacred distance between God and us.”⁴ No wonder the disciples were blown away by it! And no wonder some critics of this notion of understanding Jesus as friend can be so vitriolic in their disdain for this concept. Jesus is Lord and Savior. That’s it, that’s all, they say, because no more is necessary than that we be washed clean of our sins by the Blood of Lamb, Jesus. For me, that narrow, what’s-in-it-for-me way of seeing Jesus is just not enough. It reduces one’s relationship with Jesus to a mere transaction. Jesus deserves more than that from us who say we love him. Jesus deserves our friendship.

But what would that mean exactly? That’s why I picked this particular scripture story from Luke as a way of pondering how Jesus as friend is so very different from Jesus as only a divine figure. This famous story about the woman with the alabaster jar

² Ibid., pp.3-4

³ Ibid., p 4

⁴ Ibid., p. 4

is one we always read on Palm Sunday because of the role it plays in foreshadowing Jesus' death on the cross. But today, I'd like us to look at it as a way to see Jesus as friend to all, most especially the ones others see as undeserving. The story begins with Jesus being invited to the home of a Pharisee for dinner, an act the man undoubtedly offered out of curiosity since he wanted to learn more about this person who was turning all the teachings about God upside down. Jesus agrees, coming into the house and sitting down at the table. Almost immediately a woman comes in off the street, weeping and carrying a jar of ointment. The text says she washed Jesus feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Then she anoints his feet with the ointment while kissing his feet. The Pharisees are horrified! Everything about this was wrong. She was an unknown woman to Jesus, now carrying out this most personal of ministrations to Jesus. She was apparently not unknown to the Pharisees who quickly identify her as a sinner, something Jesus would have known if he was really so connected to God as he claimed.

And how does Jesus respond? By scolding the Pharisees! He reminds them that they had themselves violated the rules of hospitality in their own homes because they had offered him no water to wash his feet, but she did. They had not greeted him with warmth or a kiss as would have been expected of a host, but she did. They had not anointed him with oil, but she did. She, not they, had greeted him with love and kindness, not them. All they did was criticize her. And what if she was a sinner, Jesus says. Who needs forgiveness more than a sinner? That's when Jesus forgives her sins and sends her on her way with, we can imagine, the Pharisees purple with anger behind him.

In this story we see Jesus living out his experience with God as friend when he treats this woman as his friend. By comparison, the Pharisees, who should know God well enough to understand at least the notion of God as friend, treated Jesus like someone they didn't care about at all, except perhaps to stop what he was trying to do. It was, in fact, Jesus the teacher that worried them most. Jesus as friend, well, that was his problem, his misunderstanding of the way things worked. But, this Jesus taught with authority and that was a problem. Jesus the teacher, the rabbi, the "master" (in the sense of school master)⁵ – now he was a big problem, getting to be a bigger problem every day.

We Christians tend to forget or leapfrog over this whole Jesus as teacher identity. It just doesn't seem that important in the overall scheme of things in the New Testament. And we would be wrong every time we do that. Butler Bass notes that "of the ninety or so times Jesus is addressed directly in the New Testament, roughly sixty refer to him as 'teacher,' 'rabbi,' or 'master.' In the gospels, the preponderance of action that occurs is Jesus teaching."⁶ Teaching is who is Jesus was as well as what he did. We also get confused, sometimes, when we think of Jesus as rabbi because we are imagining a clergyperson which Jesus was not. The notion of rabbi as clergy did not even exist in Jesus' time. Instead, the title of rabbi meant something along the lines of "one whose teachings bore spiritual authority."⁷ In fact, as Butler Bass notes, Jesus was one of the first to be recognized as a rabbi in this new and evolving role in Judaism. "To be a rabbi in the first century was to be a teacher who was crafting a new approach to Hebrew texts, traditions and interpretations."⁸ That's

⁵ Ibid., p. 29

⁶ Ibid., p. 29

⁷ Ibid., p. 30

⁸ Ibid., p. 30

the thing we always forget! What Jesus was doing and teaching was entirely new, radically different, life transformative in its challenges to a system which encased God in an interior sanctum, far away from the people God had chosen to claim for God's self. Jesus was taking God out of the Temple, out of the Torah which could only be read in a certain way by certain people and bringing God right into the center of life as friend and companion. No wonder the Pharisees were apoplectic! No wonder the disciples would follow him anywhere! No wonder a strange woman was so overwhelmed by the extraordinary love Jesus emanated from his very being that it prompted her to break every notion of common decency at the time just to show him that she knew who he was and what he was teaching. No wonder.

So, what of us, here in our church on a sleepy morning in March when we're trying to adjust to a time change none of us really understand and yet we conform because it's just what one does? As we contemplate the days still ahead of us in Lent, how do we even feel about Jesus as friend and teacher? Are we ready to think of Jesus as our closest and dearest friend inviting us to see God the same way? Are we ready to see Jesus as a teacher in the fullest sense of the word, as one dedicated to changing lives by revealing the innermost secrets and possibilities of what life can be as we learn what it is this "friend" God asks of us, believes is possible for us? These are big questions, dear ones. Sincere questions, worthy of our ponderings and prayers. Dear ones, are we ready to call Jesus our friend? Are we ready to learn what it is Jesus the teacher wants to reveal to us? I'm hoping, and praying, our answers to those question are in the affirmative because then and only then will Jesus be truly free to be *our* Jesus, this day and always. Amen.

