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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
May 5, 2024
Easter 6

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, what a friend we have in Jesus!

I say those words, knowing that many of us are thinking of that wonderful hymn by the same title.

Hymn number 742 in our Red ELW's.

(sing) What a friend we have in Jesus/all our sins and griefs to bear!

(sing) What a privilege to carry/everything to God in prayer.

(sing) Oh, what peace we often forfeit;/oh, what needless pain we bear—

(sing) All because we do not carry/everything to God in prayer!

What a friend we have in Jesus!

And when we think of being “friends” with Jesus, we no doubt think of “friends” in our modern sense of the word.

We think of friends as those persons whom we might go to and talk with.

...as those persons who listen to us.

And, that is really the focus of that hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

It is about going to Jesus and praying to him, telling him our troubles, and knowing that Jesus listens and comforts us.

What a friend we have in Jesus, who listens to us and comforts us.

Now, this hymn is not wrong in its theology.

Indeed, Jesus does listen to our prayers, and Jesus is there to comfort us like a good friend.

So, it is not wrong to say that.

PAUSE

But, I want to take this sermon to talk about what “friendship” looked like in the ancient world.

I want to talk about the ancient sense of friendship, as it is being discussed in our gospel reading today.

Because Jesus does something very interesting in this text.

PAUSE

Now Jesus says in our gospel text today that no longer does he call his disciples “servants.”

And the word for “servants” here is better translated as “slaves.”

No longer does Jesus call us “slaves.”

But instead he calls us “friends.”

And it was such that in the ancient world when a slave was manumitted, when a slave was released, when a slave was set free from slavery, that slave would still maintain a symbolic tie with the household of his/her master.

In other words, the relationship between slave and master changed, but it wasn't a parting of ways.

The relationship changed such that it became a new relationship where the former slave was now a “client” of their former master, who was now that client's “patron.”

So the relationship changed from “slave and master” to “client and patron.”

And the client/patron relationship was ubiquitous in ancient Roman society. It was everywhere.

Everybody was either a client or a patron to someone.

And in fact, many persons were both a client to one or more patrons, those higher-up, as well as that same person was also a patron to one or more clients, those lower down.

And the social ladder was such that clients were always trying to become clients of patrons higher up on the social ladder, as well as become more prestigious patrons themselves by having more and more clients.

And so a freed slave then became part of this social network of clients and patrons.

PAUSE

And, in response to being freed, the former slave was expected to show GRATITUDE to their former master, as any client did towards their patron.

Gratitude was the glue of the relationship between clients and patrons.

And if a former slave neglected this duty—neglected to show gratitude—he/she was stigmatized by all of society as an “ingrate.”

And, ingratitude was said to be one of the major problems of those times, such that ingratitude provoked the ancient Romans to outrage.

PAUSE

So a slave’s status could change; if a slave was freed he or she would become a client.

But notice, in this gospel text, Jesus does not call his disciples “clients.”

He does not say that now that you are freed slaves, you are my clients.

No, Jesus calls his disciples, calls us, “friends.”

And this label of “friends” refers to another relationship in the ancient Roman world.

For you see, two patrons, who are high up on the social ladder would not be understood as clients to one another.

No, two patrons, high up on the social ladder, and of equal status, would refer to each other as “friends.”

And so, we see then what Jesus is doing here in this gospel reading, don’t we?

Jesus elevates his disciples, he elevates us.

Jesus transforms our status from slaves.

But Jesus does not transform our status such that we are now clients, which would have been the expected transformation.

No, Jesus' disciples are not simply clients.

Jesus transforms our status all the way to "friends," such that we are on even keel with, on par with, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that...that, folks, is pretty cool, if you ask me.

Jesus raises our lowly status such that we equal with Jesus.

Yes, our stature in the eyes of God the Father, is likened to the stature of the Father's own Son Jesus Christ.

"I do not call you slaves any longer. You are my friends," so says Jesus.

And so Jesus places us at the same level as himself.

PAUSE

Now I don't know about you, but for me that new status does create a bit of anxiety.

For what does it mean to be a friend of Jesus Christ?

In the eyes of God of Father, what does it mean to be of equal status with God the Father's own Son Jesus Christ?

PAUSE

Well, as Jesus says here in our gospel text, we are patrons like Jesus, who bless others with the gift of God's love.

That is what Jesus does, that is what God the Father does through his Son Jesus Christ—God blesses the world with the gift of God's love.

God is the ultimate patron to all the people of the world who are his clients.

PAUSE

Now, another word for God's love is grace.

And so we, as friends of Jesus Christ, as patrons like our Lord, we deal in God's grace.

And this is what makes God the ultimate patron of us all.

God is our benefactor, who is doling out grace to the world.

Grace in the form of every breath we breathe.

Grace in the form of daily sustenance of which we partake.

Grace in the form of the clothes we wear.

Grace in the form of the house and home, where we live.

Grace in the form of the health and well-being which we experience.

Grace in the form of our friends and family.

Grace in the form of security and the peace in life we enjoy.

Grace in the form of all the blessings we have come to receive from God's hand.

The petition in the Lord's Prayer—Give us this day our daily bread—hearkens on this idea that God is our ultimate patron, our preeminent benefactor.

All the blessings of daily life, not just food, are contained under the umbrella "daily bread" in that petition from the Lord's Prayer.

That is grace. That is God's love.

And as friends of Jesus, friends of Jesus, we are benefactors, too, persons called to dole out God's grace.

Since we are on the same level as Jesus, on equal status as the Son of God, we are dealers of grace.

And so we are to be generous in our kindness and care of all people.

And we are to remember that grace is free; that is why is it called grace.

Grace is a gift. It does not come with strings attached.

Grace is unconditional. It is not contingent upon anything.

We simply give grace.

We simply give out of our blessings to others.

We give our time. We give of ourselves. We give of our resources.

And most of all, MOST OF ALL, we give the good news—the hope that is Jesus Christ.

PAUSE

But it never ceases to amaze me, that here is this great gift we offer to people—the good news of Jesus Christ...

Here is this gift of mercy and hope, here is this gift of God's grace, God's love, and yet many people choose not to acknowledge God, to praise God, to worship God.

In some respects, it is like the problem of ingratitude in the ancient Roman world, where the recipients of benefactors neglected their duty to show their thanks, and provoked outrage in Roman society.

What a friend we have in Jesus! What a friend we have in God!
And yet the thanks from our human race is often less than adequate for all the grace we receive from God.

And yes, as I said earlier, grace is a free gift. God's love is not conditional.

God will bless us with or without our gratitude. That is just the way God is.

But the expression of gratitude is most important, I think, if for no other reason than for teaching us humility.

Gratitude reminds us of humility. It reminds us that all that we are and all that we have, is from God.

The source of all goodness is God.

Indeed what a friend we have in God!

PAUSE

And so, we, as benefactors to others, we who are called to be "friends" like Christ, we do not really give from our own store of our time, or give of our own persons, or give of our own resources.

For it has all been gifted to us, as one of the Communion Prayers says:
“Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts—our selves, our time, and our possessions.”

We really can claim nothing as our own.

So it is that God just uses us, need us, we who are God’s friends, God just uses us, need us, in order to bless all people.

So then all of our good deeds, all of our charity really is God’s doing, it is really is God acting through us. The thanks belongs to God.

It goes back to that command then we talked about last week: that command to love one another.

For this is how God loves us, this is how God is our friend, through the likes of Jesus, who gave everything of who he was for us...Jesus is really a conduit, it is God acting through his person, through his Son, to bless us.

And this is how God continues to love God’s people, by empowering us to be friends to others...

To give of our selves, our time, our possessions—but we are just stewards of these things anyway.

For all the thanks belongs to God, our dearest Friend.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.