

2 Kings: "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

Ps.: "The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge."

Mark.: "As they were coming down the mountain..."

Friends are Sacred; To Befriend is Divine

What songs come to mind when I say the following word: *Friend*.

Is it: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear....?"

If not a hymn, then maybe Simon and Garfunkel.

"When you're down and out /When you're on the street/ When evening falls so hard/ I will comfort you/ I'll take your part/ Oh, when darkness comes/ And pain is all around/ Like a bridge over troubled water/ I will lay me down/ Like a bridge over troubled water/ I will lay me down."

No? Maybe the theme song from Friends.

"So no one told you life was gonna be this way/ Your job's a joke, you're broke/ our love life's DOA/ It's like you're always stuck in second gear/ When it hasn't been your day, your week, your month/ Or even your year, but/ I'll be there for you/ (When the rain starts to pour)/ I'll be there for you/ (Like I've been there before)/ I'll be there for you/ ('Cause you're there for me too)."

It is no surprise that we sing that Jesus is our friend, for friends are sacred to us us--they are like bridges for us, they are there for us and we are there for them.

Truth is, we can't get through life without good friends, and hard times deepen the bonds of friendships and clarify the difference between true friends and mere acquaintances.

We should not be surprised that like us, Jesus needs friends too, nor that God provides friends for him as God provides friends for us.

And we would do well to look at Jesus' ministry through the lens of friendship, for friends are sacred, and to befriend is divine.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen

True friends, more than anything else, are our equals.

We share our lives with our friends, honest as we can be about our private struggles: celebrating together, making time and plans together, mostly agreeing about what is wrong with the world and with other people, learning how to avoid topics that will put too much strain on our friendship.

I had a friend who used to say, "The problem with the world is that my perspective is unequally distributed in it."

Our friends tend to agree with our solutions to the world's problems, which is a balm for when we feel bruised and lonely.

Now more than ever, we are defined by our friends, by the people who are in our safety bubbles--friends are sacred because they make us feel safe and help us to see we are not alone in this wide world.

Our experience in these hard times might help us to see that Jesus is in need of friends too, equals to him, to help him bridge from his ministry before the mountain top to his ministry after it, from establishing his authority and gathering a following to leading them down the mountain to contend with religious authorities and state power - all for the divine purpose of befriending the friendless.

With the light of truth shining on the mountain top, Jesus is joined by Moses, the great liberator, and Elijah, the great prophet who escapes death.

They mark a turning point in his ministry as he descends the mountaintop and begins his journey to the next mountain he will climb, carrying a cross to liberate and to set us free once and for all, God resurrecting him after death.

The shining brilliant moment on the mountaintop is a moment of clear vision, when the clouds are lifted and the sun shines and we can see the way forward clearly--it is, more than anything, a moment of clear vision.

We see clearly who Jesus is when he is transfigured on the mountaintop, and we also see clearly that to follow Jesus means descending the mountain into the valley below.

He does not stay on the mountaintop, thank the good Lord, because if he did he we would not sing hymns of friendship, for friends do not hold themselves above us, look down from the mountain and tell us how to live our lives, but rather walk into the valleys with us, serving as bridges through hard times, there for us as we are there for them.

The light shining from the mountain adds a deep challenge to the sacredness of our friendships, for friends can also hold us back and limit us from faithfully following Christ into the world, for as followers of Christ, our highest calling is to befriend the friendless.

There are times, as on the mountaintop, when this requires us to leave some of our friends behind.

Moses and Elijah appear, and then vanish, as Jesus descends the mountain.

Peter and James and John are not yet equals, but they follow after him confused and terrified and gain clarity later, when their eyes are opened, when the Spirit fills them with the power of the light revealed to them that day on the mountaintop.

The highpoint of my week is Thursday evening through Saturday morning, when my two little grandsons stay with us.

By Friday night, my wife and I are pretty well exhausted, so we have moved our normal tradition of having popcorn and ice cream for dinner on Sunday night to Friday night, much to the delight of our little fellas.

One of my jobs is to choose some music for us to listen to while we munch on popcorn. For the past few weeks I have been playing Neil Young for them because he sings as badly as I do, and the boys love my caterwauling:

One of these days/ I'm gonna sit down and write a long letter/ To all the good friends I've known/ One of these days, one of these days, one of these days/ And it won't be long (it won't be long), it won't be long (it won't be long)

This is a moment of clarity for me; I think of my own grandparents who loved me so well, and though they are gone, I think I am writing them a long letter in how I love our boys.

But the song plays in mind, too, when I come into church to work, and think of all the good people who nurtured me in faith, who loved me enough to tell me when my anxieties were getting the better of me, who taught me to love Jesus and helped me find my way to pastoral ministry.

I wish I could write them a long letter, these good friends.

I hope I am writing a long letter to them in how I live my life and how I serve as your pastor.

And in this empty building on this bitterly cold Sunday, I know sacred friendships are holding us together.

Long lovely letters have been written in the lives of our congregation, in friendships over time that sustain us now and will serve as a bridge as we return to celebrate together, to mourn together, to be there for one another... for this is the sacred gift of friendship.

In all of this, one truth is a brilliant light of shining truth that gives us strength and unites us together.

We are all called to the divine work of befriending the friendless; we follow Christ down the mountain, into the valley below, trusting always that God will provide friends for us when we walk by faith.

God bless you and your sacred friends;
God bless you in you in your divine befriending;
And may God Bless Windsor UCC.

Let us Pray.

O Lord our God: We have followed you up to the mountain, and we have prepared ourselves to follow the way of your son, but what are we to do and how are we to be?

People look at us and expect us to be miracle workers, they expect us to pretend we ourselves do not struggle and are not ourselves confused, even as we confess our faith in you. We long to accept we belong to you, we yearn to believe that you have given us enough to meet the demands of this present moment.

With your disciples throughout time, we travel down the mountain into the valley unsure whether we are equal to the sacrifices you call us to make. With your disciples throughout time, we can look back and see how you have been faithful to us.

You have given us your word and your law to bring order to our lives and to make of us a community, a people, called and chosen, set free to live and to serve.

You have given us prophets to challenge us and to remind us that we are to bring good news to the downhearted and set the oppressed free.

But what is your law for us today? And what is your challenge for us in our time?

Hear us O God, and answer our prayers. We pray for you word to inspire us, that we might be ruled by the freedom to which you call us, that we might be formed as a community that befriends strangers and aliens, a people faithful in our compassionate sharing and our willingness to be ruled by your grace.

We pray for openness to challenge, for your light to shine in the shadows of fears threaten to possess us.

Protect us from those who claim to be our friends but who hold themselves above us on their high mountains and deliver us from the sin of pretending that we are perfect and do not need to change, and give us courage to reflect your love for the friendless people in our world today who ignored, belittled, dismissed, hated, reviled, shamed, and imprisoned.

As your Son is transfigured on the mountain, transfigure us also, that we may follow him into the valley without fear, that we might willingly sacrifice on the journey of salvation.

And We pray for those we love and those with whom we struggle, trusting that you hear prayers we do not have words to utter.

We remember today especially Monica Hernandez Sigfried, with prayers for her parents Scott and Charna Kelsey and their family; and we pray for members recovering from surgery.

Hold us with tenderness; grant us strength to endure and faith to thrive; give us courage, resilience, and decisiveness; and fill us with your Spirit no matter where we might travel; and reveal your vision to us, that we might see ourselves and others as your own beloved children, in Christ, united as one human family.

Into your hands we commend all those for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, through Jesus Christ our Lord.