**Who Is Jesus – Friend?**

‘Who are you? …. Really, ‘Who are you?’

Isn’t that a question that you ask when you meet someone new?

You may not say out loud, but perhaps you ask it inside your head as you sit across the table from someone, or maybe as you are introduced to someone and shake hands for the first time.

As you look at that person, and maybe as you even hear them talk about themselves, you try to figure out … ‘who are you’.

The very notion of that question itself is inviting us into a relationship with the one other. And when we ask, ‘Who is Jesus’ – that question is also a relational question.

We might think that we all know who Jesus is – but if we are just looking for the answer to Who Is Jesus in a creed, or a doctrine, or a sermon, or even by quoting scripture – then we are missing being drawn into relationship with Jesus.

When we ask, ‘Who is Jesus’ – it is inviting us to explore and experience a relationship with Jesus.

Our understanding of Jesus as friend, as teacher, as Saviour, Lord, Way, and Presence – they are all ever changing relationships.

The answer to ‘Who is Jesus’ for you, should not be a static answer – it will change and evolve as you change in your life journey.

In Hebrews 13:8, it says “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” –* and this verse has sometimes been misunderstood that Jesus is static.

But, let me suggest that this verse is really saying that ‘Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, because we can be certain that Jesus is always seeking a relationship with us.

So, as we grow and change, that relationship will grow and change too!

I remember going to Sunday School as a little girl. I can picture the classroom – there was a big picture of an artist’s image of Jesus (white of course!) with little white children gathered around him. They were all smiling. And my Sunday School teacher would always remind us that Jesus loved us. We would sing the song:

*Yes Jesus Loves Me,*

*Yes Jesus Loves Me,*

*Yes Jesus Loves Me,*

*The Bible tells me so.*

It made me feel warm, and fuzzy, and happy. I was protected and loved by Jesus who was my friend – everything in life was good because of this.

But of course, as I became a teenager, and struggled with those adolescent issues – I wanted more than just a friend in Jesus – I wanted answers, guidance, certainties!

And then after my University days, I went through a period of questioning when I totally rejected any kind of friendship from Jesus. I really began to struggle with the question of Who is Jesus?

It wasn’t until my early 30’s that I truly began to realize the value of Jesus being my friend. During some tough decision in my life, I could hear that childhood refrain playing in my head:

*When The Road Is Rough And Steep
Fix Your Eyes Upon Jesus
He Alone Has Power To Keep
Fix Your Eyes Upon Him
Jesus Is A Gracious Friend
One On Whom You Can Depend
He Is Faithful To The End
Fix Your Eyes Upon Him*

My answer to Who is Jesus, has changed as my life journey has changed – and continues to change.

But, I will always see ‘Jesus as Friend’, because it invites me into a caring and loving relationship with Jesus.

Friendship has always been a part of our ancestral faith story.

* In the first story in the bible, we read about the friendship between Adam and Eve.
* Miriam and Ruth are great friends, and we read about their commitment to each other with the famous saying *“Where you will go, I will go to.”* (Ruth 1:16)
* In our readings from Proverbs today we heard various phrases of advice and wisdom on friendship.
* In Isaiah we can read how Abraham is referred to as a friend of God (Isaiah 41:8)
* And in Exodus, we read:

“*The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”* Exodus 33:11)

Friendship is central to the promised covenant of God.

Diane Butler Bass says in her book ‘Freeing Jesus’:

*“Friendship with God is not a biblical side story; rather it is central to the promise and faithfulness of being called people, in which all are friends, companions, siblings, and beloved.”*

This is the message that Jesus lived and preached in his ministry.

As he gathered the children around him, he told his listeners that we must be like children if we are to know the kingdom of God. Sometimes this scripture has focused on the need to be humble and accepting like children. However, my experience as a teacher and as a parent has shown me that children are not always humble and accepting. But one thing that we do like to install in children is that they should ‘play nicely, and be friends.’

I imagine that you have all either said that at sometime, or heard it said to you – “Be nice, be friends.”

If we are to be like children, then perhaps Jesus is reminding us that friendship is key for us as adults too.

As an adult, Jesus called his disciples ‘friends.’ And as a friend he shared with them everything he knew. He travelled, ate, worked, lived in community with them. Although we do not have the stories, you can just imagine the late-night friendly conversations around the fire. Jesus laughed, cried, listened, and shared with his friends. Perhaps you can recall times when you have had that close bond with friends, sharing special times together.

And Jesus reminded his disciples of how powerful the love of a friend can be with the words:

*“No one has greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* (John 15:13)

Jesus makes it very clear that he wants us to treat others as friends.



In August 2019, this image went viral on Facebook. The little boy with the lunch pail is Connor. He has autism. When he got off the bus for school, he was suddenly afraid and started to cry. Christian, the little black boy, noticed Connor crying, and he went over to him to hold his hand and lead him into school. Connor later told reporters, “He was kind to me. I was in the first day of school, and I started crying. Then he helped me, and I was happy.”

It’s a beautiful image of friendship that knows no boundaries of race or ability.

Jesus said, *“this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you ….. You are my friends if you do as I command you.”* (John 15:12-14)

Bass reminds us that friendship is contingent on love – a love that includes compassion, empathy, reaching out, going beyond what we imagined is possible.

If we reach out in love, then friendship is the result.

I am sure that all of you have had the experience of a close friend who you deeply love.

Someone who you knew was always there for you.

You know that when a hand is extended, then another reaches back in mutual friendship.

Jesus extended that healing hand of friendship again and again in his ministry.

After his death, he commanded us to do the same.

St Teresa of Avila once said: “Christ has no body now but yours …. Yours are the hands with which he blesses the world.”

We are called to be Christ’s hand of friendship reaching out to others.

And those ‘others’ my not be who you expect them to be.

Remember Jesus was friends with tax collectors and prostitutes.

He invited everyone to the table to eat with him.

We are not commanded to pick and choose who we share our friendship with;

we are not told to just be friends with those who are like us;

We are commanded to love **ALL** people.

We are commanded to Draw the Circle Wide.

In the Good News at Grace this week, I invited you to ponder and reflect on how you reach out in friendship with others?

Perhaps you might also think about who is in your group of friends – is there diversity? Do you welcome anyone?

We know of course that friendships can be risky.

The image of Connor and Christian is an image of friendship and love, but it is also an image of risk. Let’s not ignore the racial overtones of the image.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that when friendship is rooted in love, then there is a ‘cheerful confidence’ that love is greater than risk.

I know that might be times in friendship when you feel hurt, betrayed, rejected.

But these are all feelings that Jesus had too.

Yet, it didn’t stop Jesus from still being the hand of friendship that reached out in love.

And, Jesus is still reaching out that hand of friendship to us today, again and again.

Somehow as adults we sometimes don’t focus on Jesus as a friend.

We become preoccupied with doctrine and scriptural analysis.

Jesus as ‘friend’ just seems too simple for us as adults.

But when I think of Jesus as friend, I am reminded of the poem Footsteps.

I put a copy in the newsletter this week.

I know that I can look back in my life and I can recognize times when Jesus’s friendship really carried me through.

When I think of Jesus as friend, I can see how it reassures me that I always have someone to talk to, someone who will listen, someone who will guide me, someone who lets me laugh and cry, someone who wants to always be in relationship with me.

If you struggle with idea of Jesus as Friend, then I invite you to go back to that picture of Jesus playing with the children. Imagine yourself as one of those children.

And as you reflect on that image, remember, Jesus is still waiting on the playground, reaching out to you, wanting to be your friend. Amen.