

**FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD**

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

I love the movie “The Mighty” for its portrayal of friendship. It’s based on a book by Rodman Philbrick titled, “Freak the Mighty.” Max has a learning disability and Kevin wears leg braces, has other health problems, and is the new kid at school. The story begins at the beginning of their friendship in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. At one point, Kevin suggests about their friendship: *Think of it as a partnership: you need a brain, and I need legs.* Together they traipse around town having all sorts of adventures, inspired by the tales of King Arthur and his knights of the round table, Kevin perched atop Max’s shoulders like a knight atop his steed. At one point, Kevin names their joined person: *Freak the Mighty.*

I can’t recommend this story enough. It’s beautiful, heartwarming, and a bit heartbreaking. And it’s one of the best depictions of friendship I can think of. Which is why thinking about friendship with God is challenging for me.

The best friendships are symbiotic – both parties contribute and both parties benefit. Not always all at the same time. There’s give and take. Friends share their strengths, especially in the face of the other’s weakness. I can’t seem to reconcile that understanding of friendship with who I know God to be.

When I think of God as my Father – as a divine parent – that makes more sense. The parent-child relationship is not a relationship of equals. There’s an authority in the parent that the child does not share. To think of God as my friend seems less, somehow. It seems disrespectful, maybe? or overly familiar? like there’s no room in the descriptor of *friend* for the holiness of God.

I can’t reconcile God as friend with the image of Moses being told to remove his shoes because he was on holy ground because God was present. If God was Moses’ friend, surely the only reason he’d be asked to remove his shoes is to not track dirt into God’s house...

Then again, I find myself thinking about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying desperately on the eve of his crucifixion. I find myself thinking about Peter, James, and John – the three disciples Jesus asked to go with him to that Garden. Why did he ask them to go? This wasn’t a teaching moment. There wasn’t really anything they could do for him. But he wanted them there. With him. Maybe simply because they were his friends?

Maybe friendship isn't just about both parties contributing equally. Maybe friendship is something more than that. And maybe God is something more than I sometimes give him credit for...

One of the things we know to be true about God is that God is relational. It's part of the very core of who he is. When John tells us that God is love, he's telling us there's something about God's nature that can only be understood in terms of relationship. The fact that God is best understood as Trinity – as three Persons engaged in a perpetual dance that makes it impossible to fully differentiate those Persons while paradoxically, at the same time, recognizing their distinctiveness – tells us that relationality isn't just a character trait, it's part of the very essence of who God is.

Of course it is! The entire Bible, which is God's self-revelation for us, is all about God's relationship with humanity. From the moment God created the first person, God has sought out relationship with people. And while it may be easier to explain that relationship in terms of a parent to a child, friendship is a key characteristic of God's relationship with people.

Here's the thing I think I missed in my earlier musings on friendship, and that I think is key to understanding our friendship with God and his with us: friendship is a choice.

When I was in grade 7, I met E and K. They were best friends who quickly became important friends in my life as well. As I remember it, this is the story of how they became friends: On the first day of kindergarten, E showed up unable to speak a word of English, but with a box of cookies, which she shared with the girl who sat down next to her. That girl was K. And that was it! They chose each other. Admittedly, in the beginning it might have been a choice for cookies more than a choice for a friend, at least on K's part, but the point is that they didn't *have* to become friends. And over the years, they didn't *have* to stay friends. They chose friendship with each other over and over again.

Maybe friendship isn't about equality. Maybe friendship isn't about symbiosis or even interdependence. It may look like that on first glance, like with Max and Kevin in "the Mighty." But when we dig down deep for the roots of friendship, what we find, every time, is choice.

Think about this: God doesn't need us. He didn't need to create us. There wasn't some hole inside him waiting to be filled. He wasn't lonely. God was, is, and always will be complete in and of Godself. That's the whole Trinity thing. There's

a completeness to God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. There's a perfect wholeness to God.

But God, who is, at the very core of his being, relational, *chose* to create people. He *chose* to create people in his image. And he *chose* to be friends with the people he created.

Genesis 3 is the story of sin. It's the story of temptation toward independence. It's the story of people's rejection of God's friendship. At one point in the story, after Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit of the forbidden tree, we're told, in verse 8 that "they heard the sound of God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." We're told that Adam and Eve hid themselves from God. And we're told that God called out to them, looking for them.

One of the things I'm struck by in this story is how casually we're told of God strolling through the Garden – as if that was a normal thing God did. And I think that his calling out for Adam and Eve – his searching for them – suggests that going for walks with the people he'd created was perhaps a normal thing God did.

Can you imagine? That's the kind of thing friends do. They go for walks, they have conversations – they talk to each other, they listen to each other, they just generally enjoy being with each other. God didn't *have* to do this. He didn't *have* to be Adam and Eve's friend. He *chose* this. And he *keeps choosing* this.

Why would he do this? Why would he keep choosing friendship with people, especially when that choice has burned him over and over again.

The Genesis 3 story is a story about God's choice for friendship. It's the story of God, calling out to Adam and Eve, his friends, and their choice to hide – to reject him and his friendship.

This Genesis 3 story is the story of human history in a nutshell. God keeps choosing to be friends with people, and people keep choosing not to be friends with God. If God were a person like us, surely he'd have given up by now. How could friendship with people who reject you over and over again possibly be worth it?

If God wanted to be friends with us because he needed us, it might make sense. If he was lonely without us, if he needed us to do stuff for him, then it might make sense that he keeps choosing friendship with us.

But he doesn't need us. He's not lonely. He's complete in and of himself. So why does he keep making this choice?

I think he keeps making this choice for friendship because, when all is said and done, he likes us.

Isn't that why any of us are friends with the people we call our friends? Because regardless of what they have to offer – regardless of whether or not they have cookies to share – we like them? We like being with them. We like talking to them. We like doing things with them.

Of course, for us, if we want to be friends with someone and they don't want to be friends with us, it's a healthy choice to move on. It's not healthy to keep pursuing after they've rejected us. It might even be illegal to keep pursuing after they've turned down our overture for friendship. But that's people friendship. That's people-infected-by-sin friendship. God isn't people. Also, God does respect our rejection. He keeps choosing and offering friendship, but he's not a stalker. He doesn't force himself on us. He respects our choices. It's just that he doesn't change his choice.

Why? I think he likes us. Even diseased and infected by sin, I think he likes us.

It's funny, as I was typing that out – that God likes us – I was struck that I find it much easier to say that God loves us than that he likes us. I think that's because I have my mom's voice in my head from times when I was a teenager, when I was particularly horrible. You've probably heard it at times, too. Or said it. "I love you. I just don't like you very much at the moment."

Isn't it funny what that statement suggests? It seems to suggest that love is not optional. It's something we have to do. Which is what my mom meant whenever she said these words to me. She had to love me because she's my mom. There's no choice in it. But liking me is another matter.

I realize that one of the reasons it's easier for me to say that God loves us (loves me) than that he likes us, is exactly this whole *choice* thing. In 1 John 4:8 we read that "God is love." If that's true, which it is, then God has to love me – has to love us – because it's who he is. There's no choice. It just is. And it's not so much about us or our worth as it is about God and who he is.

But liking us? That's not just about who God is. That's about who we are. And that's where I get tripped up. Because I know me. And I know that there's a lot about me that's not likeable.

So why would God want to be my friend? And frankly, not to speak ill of any of you, but really, why would God want to be friends with any of us?

Have you ever had a friend who didn't get how great they were? Who didn't see in themselves what you see in them? I think that's how it is with God. I think he sees in us things we often don't see in ourselves. I think these things are the reason God wants to be our friend. I think these things are the reason he keeps choosing friendship with us, even when we reject him or aren't a very good friend in return.

So, what are these things God sees that we might not see so clearly in ourselves? What is it that God sees when he looks at us? that keeps making him want to be our friend?

I think what it comes down to is this: God sees past the sin-infection. God has not forgotten what we were like before sin. It's not that he's blind to our sin, it's that in his eyes we are not defined by sin.

God remembers how he made us. He remembers what we were like in the beginning, when he looked at us and saw that his creation, including people, was very good. But he doesn't just see some old picture of us, some image from before we were who we are now. He sees us now. Yes, he sees the sin. He sees the dark corners and the shadows. And he desperately wants us to be free from all that darkness. But he also sees the bright spots. He sees the parts of us that defy darkness. He sees humour and intelligence; he sees compassion and grace; he sees strength and persistence; he sees creativity and thoughtfulness and so much more. And he knows these things he sees are wonderful and good.

You might not see these things in yourself, but God sees them. Because God put them in you when he made you. Yes, sin might cloud these wonderful parts of us, sin might taint the good in us, but God sees past the sin. God sees what we are without sin. That's why God wants to be our friend. That's why he keeps choosing friendship, no matter how many times he is rejected. Because he looks at us and sees that we are, in the words of Psalm 139, fearfully and wonderfully made. In short, he likes us. He likes me and he likes you. And because of what he sees when he looks at us, we can't make him stop liking us. We can reject his friendship, but we can't make him stop offering his friendship.

So let's talk about us. What does it mean for us to choose friendship with God? What does it look like, from our side, to be God's friend?

Almost 15 years ago I was in Turkey on an amazing adventure. One of the things I learned while I was there, was the Turkish word for friend. It's *arkadash*. The

literal translation of which is “the one at your back.” A friend is one who has your back; someone who protects you, fights for you and with you; someone who keeps an eye on your blind spots. If that’s not a great descriptor of friendship with God, I don’t know what is. Listen to these words from Psalm 46: The Lord is my refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Or there’s that story from 1 Kings 18, where Elijah makes a bet against a bunch of other prophets. If it was happening today, I imagine it happening in a bar around a pool table. What’s a friend to do when you make a ridiculous bet you can’t possibly win? Have your back of course. And if you’re Elijah making a bet, and God is your friend, how could you lose? Because God is absolutely the kind of friend who doesn’t leave you stranded just because you made a dumb bet. So what might have been a dumb bet if anyone other than God was his friend, turned out o.k. because God had his back. Sounds like friendship to me.

But that’s what it means for *us* to have *God* as our friend. What does it mean for *us* to *be* God’s friend? He doesn’t really need *us* to have *his* back...

To be someone’s friend is to know them. It’s to know what they like and what they hate; it’s to know what makes them laugh and what makes them cry; it’s to know how to help when they’re struggling and what to do when they’re sad. Of course, we don’t know all these things the moment we become friends with someone. But we learn these things, because we spend time with our friend, we talk to our friend, we notice things about our friend.

In Psalm 139, the psalmist writes of God, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.” God knows the psalmist who is his friend.

But our friendship with God isn’t one-sided. It’s not just God knowing us. It’s us knowing God. That’s the whole point of the Bible – to know God. God inspired all sorts of people over hundreds and hundreds of years to write all sorts of things to help us know God – what he likes and doesn’t like, what he does and doesn’t do, what he wants and what he doesn’t want of his friends. God *wants* us to know him. And not just from the Bible.

People have been writing and singing and talking about their friendship with God and all the things they know about God, through all the years since the Bible.

And if you really want to know God – not just know about him, but really know him, like you know a friend... God is present with us – with you, with me – just



waiting to be noticed, to be known. He shows up when we pray, when we meditate, worship, gaze upon creation, when we serve people, sit in silence or sit surrounded by the hum of neighbours and strangers. God wants to be known by us. He wants to be known as completely as a person knows their best friend. Because God wants to be our – yours and my – friend.

What does it mean to be God's friend? It means he's got your back. It means he doesn't run at the first sign of trouble. It means even seeing all the worst parts of us, he still chooses to stand by our side.

What does it mean to be God's friend? It means to know him, and to want to know him more. It means to spend time with him, to talk to him, and to listen to what he has to say.

Can you imagine friendship with God?

With a friend like God, would there be anything on earth to fear?

Have you ever gotten lost and been unable to find your way? It's a scary thing. I once got lost in a strange country, in a city I didn't know, filled with thousands of people I didn't understand. It was terrifying. I don't know if I've been that scared before or since. Another time, in another city, surrounded by different people I didn't understand, I got lost again. But this time I got lost with friends. And despite the situation, I wasn't scared. It was an adventure. Because I was with friends.

That's what it's like to journey through life with God as your friend. There's nothing to fear. It's an adventure.

But here's the thing about friendship that I think we often forget when we talk about friendship with God. Whenever we talk about friendship with God, it seems we talk about all that God does for us. We talk about how intimately he knows us. We talk about his deep love for us. And all of that is wonderful. It's true. But friendship is not friendship if it's one-sided. For God to be my friend, I must also be his friend.

The thing is: there is no requirement that we be God's friend. God is our Saviour, regardless of whether or not we are his friend. Paul wrote, in Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." There's no requirement of friendship there. Our salvation is not contingent upon friendship with God. God loves us, regardless of whether or not we love him back. Earlier in Romans, in chapter 5, verse 10 Paul tells us that "while we were enemies [of God – not just, *not friends*, but actual

enemies], we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.” When Jesus went to the cross, when God the Father watched his only Son die, he didn’t just do it for his friends, he did it for everyone. Even his enemies.

The barrier that is sin, that stands between us and God, was demolished by God because God loves us. Period. Not because we’re his friend. Just because he loves us. Because that’s who God is.

All of that is true. Regardless of whether or not we choose to be God’s friend.

Friendship is extra. It’s a thing God offers freely, and that we are free to accept or reject. God will never stop offering it. But it will only be friendship if we freely choose to be his friend. Because friendship is defined by choice. Not just God’s choice. But our choice as well.

Do you want to be friends with God?

I do. I want to be better friends with God this time next year than I am today. Because what I’ve learned and what I continue to learn is that there is nothing in the world quite as incredible as friendship with God.

There’s this old hymn, written near the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by an American pharmacist-turned-songwriter. It’s called “In the Garden.” And when you read the lyrics, you can’t help but know that the writer was a friend of God.

The chorus brings to mind that Genesis 3 picture of God strolling through the Garden of Eden with his friends, Adam and Eve. Except instead of Adam and Eve, it’s you or it’s me he’s strolling with. These are the words of the chorus:

*He walks with me, and he talks with me,  
and he tells me I am his own.  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
none other has ever known.*

Can you imagine yourself in that garden? Can you imagine yourself sitting in a coffee shop with your friend, God, chatting over a steaming cup of your favourite brew? Can you imagine yourself bundled against the cold, strolling by the waterfront with your friend at your side, noticing and talking about what you see together? Can you imagine yourself on the subway, heading somewhere with your friend, commenting on the many and strange people you encounter along the way?

Can you imagine being God’s friend?



It's not required. And it does take work to nurture this friendship. (Just like it takes work to nurture any friendship.) It takes intentionality. It takes consistency and commitment....

Earlier we joined M and G in reading Jesus' words from John 15 – words about abiding in Jesus. At the very end of that reading, in John 15:11, Jesus says this: I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Have you ever shared a really good laugh with a friend? The kind of laugh that makes it hard to breathe, that makes your eyes water and your stomach hurt? It think that is the kind of joy Jesus was talking about – the kind of joy friendship with God promises.

Will you choose friendship with God? I hope so.

Over the coming weeks and months we're going to be talking a lot about friendship with God. I might not use that exact phrase, but everything will be about nurturing friendship with God, whether that friendship is new or old and familiar. We'll be exploring and experimenting with tried-and-true practices that God's friends have relied on for thousands of years to keep that friendship alive and growing. I hope you'll go on this journey with me.

Sometimes in the past I've suggested things we can do at home coming out of the sermon and Scripture from Sunday. As we move forward with this topic of friendship with God, I'll be suggesting things for us to practice during the week, every week. The idea isn't to add something exhausting to your already exhausting week. Instead, I hope you'll find that the things I suggest, all of which are about nurturing friendship with God, will add something wonderful to your week. Because friendship with God is just about the most wonderful thing there is.

Here's what I'd like you to try this week: Look up Psalm 42:1 – 2. It reads this way:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

Write those words out on a post-it or a scrap piece of paper or a napkin – whatever you have handy. Write it whatever language you're most familiar with. And then put it on your bathroom mirror or in some other place that you are sure to see at least once a day for longer than a couple seconds.

Then, every day this week, every time you see your note, read the words silently or out loud. (I usually prefer out loud so I can hear them, not just see them, but it's hard to read out loud if I'm reading while brushing my teeth.) Don't just read these words once. Read them over and over again for a few minutes. Read as written – as a fact. Or, if you're not there yet, turn them into a request. Something like this:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so may my soul long for you, O God.  
May my soul thirst for God, for the living God.*

Or you could read them as written, and then tag on something to the end, like, *May it be so, God.*

However you do it, the goal is that these words become a prayer – a meditation – and that as you speak them over and over again throughout the week, they become more and more true. Because this is where friendship with God begins. It begins with longing. It begins with *wanting* friendship with God.