

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Friends of God”
February 28, 2010
Luke 13:31-36, Exodus 34:11-16

Father, “Where are you going?”

Daughter, “Out.”

Father, “Who are you going out with?”

Daughter, “Friends.”

Father, “Do I know them?”

Daughter, “I don’t know.”

Father, “Is Seth going to be there?”

Daughter, “Why do you want to know?”

Father, “Because I told you I don’t want you hanging out with him!”

Daughter, “You don’t trust me.”

Father, “No I trust you...I just don’t trust him. So no you can’t go.”

Daughter, “You are so mean.”

Have you ever been in a conversation like that? I think it is the kind of conversation that parents and children have been having since Adam and Eve said to their third son Seth that he was not allowed to hang out with talking snakes. Now granted, parents are human and we are not always perfect. But for the sake of children and teens that are here this morning, we do learn some things as we grow older. One of those things that we learn is that the people we hang out with; the friends that we keep shape our character and the decisions that we make. While friends are not the greatest influence on our lives...and for parents realize that you are the greatest influence on your children’s lives...we know that because of the connection we have with friends they can be a positive or a negative influence on us. They can help us be our best by challenging us to make good choices. They can harm us by convincing us to do things that we know better than to do...but we end up doing anyway. Our friends thus become important in shaping our character...which is something that God clearly understood.

It is that understanding, that friends shape our character that is at the heart of the passage this morning from Exodus. God had been working hard with God’s people. God had freed them from slavery. God had fed and clothed them. God had put up with their whining and nagging. God had given them rules to live by. Now God was going to send them into a new neighborhood called Canaan. As God was preparing to send them off God made it abundantly clear whom God did not want God’s children hanging out with. “God did not want them hanging out with any of the “ites”: meaning the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites or Jebusites. I realize that his desire of God, for God’s children not to hang out with these other people might sound, well...not very loving. Surely, we say, God loves everyone so why shouldn’t God’s people hang out with everyone? Which by the way was a question God’s people kept asking.

The response is that God knew God's children were not mature enough to interact with these other people and not be led into death dealing rather than life giving ways of life. The religion of the "ites" was one in which the demonic was praised and human sacrifice was still part of their rituals. So, God, as any good parent would, says, "I don't want you playing with those nations down the block."

I know that at this moment the one question that is on most of our minds is, did God's children listen any better than our children sometimes do? The answer is no, they did not listen any better. In fact the vast majority of the Old Testament is the story of God dealing with children who first refused to listen and then got themselves into a great deal of trouble because they did not listen. God's children were constantly not only ignoring the rules that their heavenly parent had given them, but were going down the block to play. The result of this misbehavior was that they became both spiritually and politically captive to their neighbors. Instead of allowing their friendship with God to be the guiding factor in orienting their lives, they let their other friends decide. God's response was twofold. There were times when God practiced tough-love, allowing God's children to suffer the consequences of their actions. There were others when God would come to the rescue by calling charismatic leaders such as judges and prophets to set God's people free.

The issue became that God's people never really liked the prophets that God sent to call the people back to friendship with God. While the children liked the freedom they never really liked the rules. So the prophets often found themselves running for their lives. Sometimes they survived and other times they did not and were killed by the children of God. We might think that God would simply give up on God's children and find another family. But God's patience is immense and so God decided to send not simply another prophet but to send God's only son in order to help not only God's Hebrew children but all people become friends with God. Unfortunately Jesus did not appear to any more luck than did the prophets. As we pick up our Jesus story this morning we find the powers that be trying to hunt Jesus down and kill him. Jesus reflected on this situation by remembering the love of God, "How often have I desired to gather God's children together and as a hen gathers her brood under her wings." But Jesus also reflects on the children's unwillingness to do so, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it."

Jesus however refuses to run away and hide from the threats. Jesus believed that it was his calling and duty to make it possible for every human being to become a friend of God, for it was in that friendship that all of God's children could find life and life abundant. So Jesus was willing to go all the way to Jerusalem; to that moment when the people would cry out on Palm Sunday, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus was willing to go to Jerusalem even if it meant his death, which he knew it did. Helping people become friends of God was that important.

This begs two questions: how important is it for us to be friends of God and what does it mean to be a friend of God? These are important questions because in our lives we are constantly engaged with a wide variety of people...classmates, neighbors, co-workers, friends on Facebook, twitter, and at church; friends and others who influence who we are and the choices

we make. Each brings a different perspective to how we ought to live our lives. The challenge for each of us, regardless of our age then, is how we go about prioritizing those friendships and the influences they offer. Which ones are going to influence our views and behaviors more than others? The call from Jesus and from our tradition is that our friendship with God is to be the foundation for every other relationship. It is to be the foundation because if we allow God to orient our beliefs and actions, then we are anchored in a relationship that will always point us to life giving, world renewing ways of being human. That friendship allows us to go play with all of those down the street and do so in a manner that positively impacts them, rather than negatively impacts us.

So here is what I challenge you to do today. When you get home, or head out to lunch with your friends...discuss this question. What does it look like for me to be a friend of God?