

Friends of God: Our Role in Shaping a Better World

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Preaching on:

1 John 3:1–7

John 15:12–15

Happy Friendship Sunday everybody! It's good to have friends here with us. We're doing exciting stuff here at GRCC, and we want to share it with you. And friendship is an important part of the solution to the problems that afflict our world today. Love and friendship are virtues that hold the power to transform us from within and radiate out into our communities and the whole rest of world.

John's first letter says that we're all children of God. BUT what we are *becoming* hasn't been revealed

yet. We're children of God who don't know yet what we're going to be when we grow up. You could say, I guess, that we're all a work in progress. And we know this viscerally, I think. We look around in our lives, in our communities, in our world, and we know we could probably do at least a little bit better. We could probably do a little bit better than 11 different versions of *The Real Housewives*. We could probably do a little better than trying to bomb our way to peace. We could probably do a little better figuring out ways to curb greenhouse gas emissions. We could probably do a little bit better than eating the entire tub of ice cream while binging on those 11 different versions of *The Real Housewives* while trying not to think about climate change and war.

I mean I know you get it and you see it too. From the personal to the political, from the local to the global, there's little doubt that we are a work in progress. But if it's true, if you agree with me (as I think you probably do) that we're all works in progress, what's the process? What's the process of formation that's at work on us? From where does our salvation come? What's making things better?

One answer we hear a lot is that science and technology are going to make the world a better place. Now, please, I'm not a luddite, I'm not a science denier, I'm not a conspiracy theorist. Science is real. It works. Technology has vastly improved our lives in many ways. But technology can go both ways. Atomic power used in power plants could be a good thing, as long as you don't have a leak or a meltdown and you can figure out a good place to dump your nuclear waste. But atomic power used in bombs and missiles could end the world.

And science, which is very good at producing facts, is not as good at producing action. So, there's decades of scientific consensus on climate change, but science has yet to produce a shift in our actions commensurate with the consequences that will be faced by future generations. Science and technology can improve a lot, but they can't improve *us*. They don't make us suddenly mature and wise. If we're foolish and selfish, we'll use our science and technology in foolish and selfish ways. If we're wise, we'll use them wisely. But where's the button to push to make us all wise? That tech doesn't exist. And it never will.

An alternative vision of what's going to make the world better comes from traditional religion—that our salvation or the return to paradise or the kingdom of heaven (or whatever you want to label it) will be entirely transcendent. It'll come from outside of us, from beyond us. God will definitively, miraculously, and apocalyptically intervene. The world will end, the badies will suffer terrible things, the good guys will be rewarded. And this new, perfect world order will last forever and ever and ever.

According to this model there's really nothing much for you and me to do at all, except to stay out of trouble and to make sure we have all the proper religious affiliations: we've participated in the proper rites and rituals, we've affirmed the proper beliefs. And then we just wait for the trumpets to sound.

The problem with this is that it completely misses God's living, real presence in our world and in our lives. God is imminent in everything all around us. God is here. We Christians believe that God came

into our world, through Jesus, as a human being, as a fully human participant in humanity's process. We don't have to wait for the end of the world for God to show up. Our faith tells us that God is here now, God is calling us and moving us to do new and great things, and God cares deeply about the fate of the present world. Waiting for God to fix things denies the fact that God is already at work within and among us. And Jesus didn't teach anyone to sit around and wait. Jesus taught us to believe a few things, but mostly Jesus was giving us the proper worldview for living more justly and more wisely.

There is a third way, a middle path, I believe, between science and religion that hasn't been fully and properly defined or realized yet in our world. As religious people, as Christians, that should be thrilling to us. We're not here to lead this sort of bifurcated life, where on the one hand we're religious and on the other hand we're worldly, and religion is private and personal and totally irrational and incapable of being discussed without offense and bloodshed, and therefore irrelevant to world and its problems.

The job of religion isn't to wait out history in the cloister of faith. The job of religion and Christianity in particular I believe in the 21st century is to heal this division between our brains and hearts, between spirit and matter. This is the Christianity that has a purpose in our world—a Christianity that longs deeply for individual and cultural integrity—wholeness. For us, that's the process that's going to make to make the world a better place, that's where I believe God is calling us.

This work will only be accomplished if we follow Jesus' greatest commandment: to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love our enemies even, to love another as he loved us. Incredibly, in John's gospel, Jesus tells us that we're his friends, not his servants. And in friendship there's equality. Now, we're not saying Jesus isn't great or special. What Jesus is saying to us is that whatever greatness or goodness or potential we see in him, he now sees in us. Whatever hope we put in him, he now also has in us. Jesus has recruited us. As Teresa of Avila wrote, "Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours." And as John wrote in his letter, "What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when Jesus is revealed, *we will be like him.*" We don't know yet exactly where we're going, exactly what we're becoming. We don't know exactly what the process is by which we will grow and develop. But what we do know is that we have the potential, and if we are wise perhaps the destiny, to be like Jesus.

What's going to make things better? God's working to make things better through us right now—as God's friends, as Jesus' body. When we love one another, when we live with one another in friendship that stretches us beyond our human limitations, when we grow so that our technological progress and our maturity find alignment, when we show the world that God is right here with us and all of God's potential is already being offered to us as freely and as openly as anything is offered to a friend, that is what is going to make things better.

Friends, I believe we are on the cusp of a transformation, a pivotal moment where we can harness the teachings of love, the principles of friendship, and the advancements of science and technology to create a world that reflects the very best of what it means to be human. This is our calling, this is our

mission, and together, we can shape a world that mirrors the boundless love and potential God sees in us.