

## **Friends with God**

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, 25 April 2021

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

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### **Bible reading: John 15:9-17**

Jesus said, "I have called you friends"

*Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover our peace; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

There was recently a television series put out called "God Friendened Me". Did any of you see it? I didn't have more than a passing acquaintance with it. It sounded dangerously shmaltzy... But there's something interesting in the premise of it that's worth commenting on today.

In the series, the main character, Miles, is the producer of a podcast about atheism – he is an atheist, though his father is an Episcopalian priest. One day, he receives a friend request on Facebook, which comes, it appears, from God. At least, the name of the account is God, and there's not other identification of who is behind it. Throughout the series, the question is, is this really God?

What Miles receives through this connection is actually a series of invitations to add other friends – he's directed to meet various individuals who, it turns out, he is able to help. And as he helps them, all sorts of good things happen in ways that appear, of course, miraculous. Ultimately, through the people that God puts across his path Miles' own character is being shaped. Which is what happens with our friendships – we learn from our friends, and are shaped by their character – when you know someone's friends you know a lot about that person.

The series could be said to be based on this gospel story that we've heard today. The reading is set during the time when Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure – for his death, and his ascension to the Father. In this passage, Jesus says to his disciples that he no longer calls them merely students or clients or slaves, but he calls them – he calls us - friends.

There are three parts of the message in this passage that I want to highlight.

Firstly, Jesus emphasises that he chooses his disciples, he chooses us. That emphasis on him choosing us means that we do not hold all of the responsibility for the relationship – he is making his care for us clear. He chooses us not just as friends, but he chooses us to bear fruit: it is through our actions as his friends that good is done in the world, and that others can grow in his friendship too. This is the perhaps main premise in the "God Friendened Me" TV series, as Miles find himself having an impact on people's lives even in ways that he didn't expect.

Secondly, as a friend, Jesus gives himself for us. Indeed, his love for us is such that he gives his very life for us, which is the whole unfolding of the story of the cross. But he pushes that further: in the same way that he loves us, he asks us to love one another. He asks us to learn from him, to be shaped by his own character, such that we also give of ourselves for the sake of those around us who we love. Or, more broadly, for the sake of those around us who God loves, and who we may or may not have learned to love yet.

Because the third point is that we are called into relationships with others whom Jesus also calls his friends. Much of our Christian growth, and much of the way that we nurture our relationship with Jesus himself is through the relationships that we have with our Christian sisters and brothers.

In the church, it's very helpful for our own spiritual health when we have friendships with others who are on this journey with Jesus, so that as we do life with God and with each other we can be strengthened and supported, and sometimes inspired and shaped, by close friends around us. While that *can* happen just in our interactions on a Sunday morning, and certainly in our experience on Sundays of praying and reflecting together and knowing the prayers of the church around us, in many ways it happens best as those relationships are nurtured beyond just Sunday mornings. And in the meantime, so long as we don't spend Sunday mornings just with the people who we've known for a long time, God also brings across our paths people who we may not have met previously or may have never got to know, and if we regularly take the time to see who else God is bringing across our paths we may find that we have something to give and something to learn in interactions with others.

Ironically, for the church to be a friendly – at least to newcomers – we need to always be looking out for who God might be bringing across our paths today. All of those skills from the fete are just as important the next day, too, and important for our enrichment as a fellowship learning from all the people who meet and participate here.

I've heard it truly said that when Jesus comes into your life he invites all of his friends. Some are friends that we are naturally drawn to, and others maybe not so much. But if they are Jesus' friends, then there will be something in there for us to learn from, too.

Jesus calls us friends, and in doing so he makes clear that he chooses us, and chooses us to bear fruit: to do good in the lives of those he brings across our paths; he calls us to love our friends (which includes him) with the same kind of self-giving love that he shows for us; and he brings his other friends across our paths. In this is an invitation for us to think about how we nurture our friendships with people who are good for our own spiritual wellbeing and walk with Jesus; and how we are open to encounters with others which may both call something out of us and lead us to know Christ better. Because we are more than merely students, clients or slaves of Jesus: he calls all of us to be his friends.