

Remembering Friends & Family
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All Saints' Sunday

“God Friended Me” is the name of a new TV series that caught my attention recently. How many of you have seen it? It is about a twentyish something young man named Miles who lives in New York City. He grew up there in a local church where his father is still the pastor. Miles and his father do not get along that well, in part because Miles says that at this point in his life, he does not believe in God. But, then Miles gets a friend request on his phone from God. (For those of us who are not that familiar with what it means to be “friended” by someone, it simply means the person sent you a request to be on a list of people with whom you may choose to send messages.) Miles doesn’t know what to make of this or who this might really be, but he decides to go ahead and be “friended” by God. It is then that God starts sending Miles messages – actually the names of individuals Miles is to contact. In each case, Miles discovers someone in need of help, so he helps them. I encourage you to find time to watch the show because it raises some interesting questions of faith about what it means to respond to a God who cannot be seen – which may be what faith is all about in the first place.

On this All Saints’ Sunday, we have already remembered those whom we, as Christians, believe by faith, to now be in the very presence of God – even though we cannot see that for sure. It is something we believe *by faith*. So, what does it mean for us to live here and now by faith -- relating to a God we cannot see? And, in thinking about those “saints” whom we remember today and believe are now in the presence of God, I want to pose this question: “What do we imagine those saints might say to us is important to remember? In other words, *what would the saints tell us to remember?* I think our passage from the Bible may help tie these things. It is from Hebrews 11:8-16:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:8-16, NIV)

So, this passage we have just read is part of a chapter in the New Testament of the Bible in which the writer begins by saying “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV) And then the writer lists people from what we call the Old Testament, who lived “by faith.” In fact, he begins each account with the words, “By faith . . .” We do not have time to read each one of these great stories of faith, but I encourage you to do it sometime soon, because it will remind us as Christians how foundational the stories of the Old Testament are to our Christian faith. They are the very basis for the story of what God is doing to save our broken world. And this greater story is fulfilled in Jesus. In the eleventh chapter we are reading from today, each story begins with the words, “By faith” – much like a sermon or speech in which a phrase is repeated again and again to make a point and build to a climax. For example, Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” comes to mind.

Today, we only have time to focus on the story of Abraham and Sarah. This story reminds us that Abraham and Sarah were called by God to leave their home and travel like migrants to a foreign country. They did not know where they were going, or if they would even be welcomed there – only that God told them to go, so they went. But the writer interprets this story as Abraham and Sarah “looking forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:10b, NIV) God has also promised them a child, but God did not fulfill that promise until they were in their old age – a true miracle.

The writer then sums up that all of these people whose stories, like Abraham and Sarah, have been told, lived “by faith” -- in the sense that they did not receive all their promises fulfilled in this life. The writer says, “Instead, they were looking for a better country – a heavenly one.” (Hebrews 11:16a, NIV) In other words, their faith not only inspired them to follow God and do whatever God wanted them to do, they also believed that God would fulfill every promise – if not in this world, then in the world to come. This is how the writer explains the first words of this eleventh chapter: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see...” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV)

As we said earlier, as Christians we believe that those brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before us are now living in the very presence of God. Maybe they are gathered around a great banquet table enjoying each other’s company. But, as I asked earlier -- if we could have a conversation with them now, *what would the saints tell us to remember?* I called today’s message “Remembering Friends & Family.” When I first think of the phrase “Friends & Family” I think of a phone calling plan. You can still set one up. You choose either five or ten “friends & family” to be in your group, and if you pay for a certain number of monthly minutes to use, the calls to these select friends and family are free – or something like that.

I imagine that if we were able to ask the saints what they think we should remember from their viewpoint, they might say things like this. First, I think they might tell us to remember that *we are a friend of God.* The story of Abraham and other Bible passages remind us that Abraham was called “a friend of God.” If we then move over to our New Testament, we find in the book of James that Abraham was called, “the friend of God.” (James 2:23, NRSV) So, I think the saints would tell us to remember that *God “friends” people.*

In John's gospel, it tells us that Jesus calls us his "friends." (John 15:13-15) So, not only does God "friend" people, like the TV show suggests, but Jesus, who is God-in-the-flesh, also calls us his "friends." Therefore, God is not our enemy, or someone who is out to "get us." Like the TV show, God actually initiates the request to be our friend. It doesn't even begin with our search for a friend like Jesus. It begins with God requesting to be our friend. That is great news, and I believe it is the kind of thing the saints would tell us to remember. *We are God's friends!*

So, what do we do with that? What do we do with the good news that we are God's friends? Well, I want to go back to the TV show in which Miles is friended by God, and then given things to do. His "missions" involve people who need help, and Miles is all about helping people -- even though he doesn't have the "God part" of that worked out yet. So, God friends him in order to help people, and when Miles does that, it makes a real difference in the lives of others. And on at least one occasion when he tried to ignore the message from God, the person he was supposed to help struggled. So, what are we to do in response to being friended by God?

I think a passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians can help. The Good News Translation of the Bible uses a particular word that may help us. Paul writes:

Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his *friends* and gave us the task of making others his *friends* also. Our message is that God was making all human beings his *friends* through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his *friends*.
(2 Corinthians 5:17-19, GNT—italics mine)

One of my seminary professors, Ben Johnson, actually created a resource for how to share the good news of God's love with others based on this passage that he called, "Friend-Maker for God." So, what do we do in response to being friended by God? *We are friend-makers for God.*

Isn't that a great way to think of sharing the good news of God's love and grace? We are making friends for God. Who doesn't want more genuine friends? I believe the saints would tell us to remember that we are each called to be a friend-maker for God. And we each have different ways, gifts, and life situations in which to do that. So, how is God reaching out to you to be a friend-maker for God today, tomorrow, and every day of your life? And will you respond, or will you just try to "unfriend" God? There are people all around us who really need a friend, and each one of us can do something about that.

So, I think that the saints might tell us to "remember friends" -- that we are God's friends and we are called to be friend-makers for God. But, I also think they might tell us to remember that *we are family*. Now when I hear that phrase, "we are family" -- I cannot help but think of the disco song by the group, Sister Sledge. I believe the saints would tell us to remember that *we are family* -- all of our sisters and brothers in this extended family of faith. It is what it means to be the church -- that we are an extended family of faith. As we say around here, we are also an intergenerational family where we intentionally interact not just with people about our own age and those like us -- but those who are different from us. I believe that there are things that happen

here on Sunday that rarely happen any other place in our world. That is one reason we need to be here in worship – to be part of the extended family of faith, because *we are family*.

However, I think that we are also family in a *larger* sense – that we are part of the larger family of humankind. As Christians we believe that everyone is made in the image of God. We are all God’s children and we should relate to one another like family. Now it is human nature to form groups or even tribes. We all need community and family. The Bible tells us at the very beginning in the book of Genesis that it is not good to be alone. (Genesis 2:18, NIV)

I am reading a book by Ben Sasse in which he is looking at the growing divisions in our world. He believes, as a politician, these divisions cannot be solved by politics. The name of the book is *Them*. He notes that we have always gathered in groups or even tribes, around what we are *for*. He suggests that for the first time, we now gather in groups or tribes around what we are *against* – which he calls “Them.” We are no longer *for* certain things or people – we are against *them*. Sasse goes on to say that no longer do we view “them” as simply those with different viewpoints. We have now moved to the point of viewing “them” as those who are evil and who need to be destroyed. In thinking about recent events, it appears that when someone who is alone, perhaps mentally unstable, and is influenced by that kind of thinking -- that disturbed person can go as far as to commit the tragic shooting we saw recently in the Pittsburgh synagogue in which a man reportedly decided to get rid of “them.”

Friends, we need to remember that *we are family*. We are family not just within this extended family of faith, and not just with people who think, believe, vote, and look like us – *we are family with everyone created in the image of God*. We need to treat one another as family – in the best sense of the word. Remember that *we are friends* and *we are family*.

In the book of Hebrews, it also tells us that we are surrounded by yet another kind of family – the “great cloud of witnesses” who dwell in the very presence of God -- encouraging us and praying for us as we live out our lives here on this earth. (Hebrews 12:1, NIV)

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.