

## “The Question: ‘Who do You Say that I Am?’”

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### **Scripture**

Isaiah 41:1-10  
 Matthew 18:1-6

### **Hymns or Songs**

“What A Friend We Have In Jesus” 412

“In The Garden” 309

“On Eagle’s Wings”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvpjxfWrjzY>

### **Exodus 33:7-11**

#### ***The Tent of Meeting***

<sup>7</sup> Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. <sup>8</sup> Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. <sup>9</sup> When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. <sup>10</sup> And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. <sup>11</sup> Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

### **Matthew 18:1-6**

#### ***Whoever Becomes Simple Again***

**18** At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” <sup>2</sup> And calling to Him a child, He put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup> and said, “**Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** <sup>4</sup> **Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**

<sup>5</sup> **“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, <sup>6</sup> but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”**

### **Insights for Worship**

*Secrets of Heaven* 5132 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“Charity consists in desiring the welfare of one's neighbor, in having an affection for what is good, and in acknowledging that since what is good is one's neighbor, those who are governed by good are consequently one's neighbor, but varyingly so, depending on the amount of good that governs the individual person. Therefore since charity consists in having an affection for what is good, it also consists in feelings of mercy for those in distress. The good of charity holds such feelings within it because it comes down from the Lord's love towards the whole human race, a love which is 'mercy' because the whole human race is in distress.”

### **SERMON: “The Lord’s Question: Who do You Say that I Am?”**

If you were to think about the most common roles that God plays in your life, what might be the first two or three that come to your mind? Now, this is not a quiz by any stretch of the imagination. Whatever you say in your mind right now won't be given a grade like a B, a B+ or an A. God doesn't work like that. Some examples of how folks like you and me might answer this question, which is again, “If you were to think about the most common roles that God plays in your life, what might be the first two or three that come to your mind?”

For some people things like “my Savior” would come to their minds because the most frequent moments in their lives that they open up deeply toward God is when they are under duress, feeling anxious or feeling afraid of this or that and they know they could use some Divine intervention and so to let out a fervent spiritual cry for help. Their prayer might sound like this: “O please, PLEASE Lord, I'm really worried about my relationship with my boss right now and I need your help to smooth things over at work!” Or, another common role that God plays in people's lives is that of Divine Judge. We may feel like we have been wronged by a family member or by someone else we know, and so we reach out to the Lord and say in effect: “Lord, my boyfriend...or my coworker...or my sister really hurt me yesterday, and I'm counting on you to be the ultimate Judge in my situation, and I'd like for you to judge them and punish them accordingly.”

Another frequent role God plays in our lives is that of infinite Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and knowing there are practically limitless ways that my life or this huge, crazy, mixed up world could really begin spinning out of control, I am relying on you, God, to yes keep this whole wide world in your hands and please just keep things together! “Help me, O Lord, to trust that you have everything under your guidance and watchful eye and help me to ease up a bit and stop ‘white knuckling’ my grip on my steering wheel so my blood pressure can come down!” Another common

role for so many Sunday worshipers is to essentially put the Lord inside of the walls of our particular sanctuary or inside of our favorite stained glass window or mosaic for that matter and really pay close attention to God on Sunday mornings, but then during the other six days of the week....not so much. This would be God's role as my religious icon or Master of my Sabbath Day, but then we let Him fade into the dusty background of life.

My sermon title now comes into play at this point in my sermon, because the truth is, that this important question I began with a few minutes ago really isn't coming from me to you—it is coming right from Jesus' lips while He is sitting beside you now, today. This was the same question that Jesus asked His disciples one day after they had arrived at one of the districts around the Sea of Galilee. In *Matthew 16* we read: "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, **"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"** <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup>[Then] He said to them, **"But who do you say that I am?"** (Mtt. 16:13-15)

Would it surprise you to know that in addition to Peter's confession that Jesus was or is the "Christ," the Son of the living God (which is another way of saying God in His Divine-Humanity), one of the deepest and most spiritually meaningful ways to see and feel and experience who Jesus is in our lives each day is: *FRIEND?* Yes, our Divine-Best Friend.

Why would this be true, do you think?

What qualities are parts of a really good, lasting friendship? Trust for one thing. It's knowing that I can come to my best friend at any time and know that they really care about my issues and concerns in life, and that I can count on them to be open, real and honest with me at all times. You know, we may not often stop to think about what makes for a genuine friend. One seminary professor expressed this rather simply, saying: "Somebody to talk to, someone to depend on, and someone to enjoy." (William Rawlins, quoted in Julie Beck, "How Friendships Change In Adulthood," *Atlantic*, Oct. 22, 2015)

Let us remember that in *The Gospel of John* after Jesus had been with His disciples for some two years of itinerant, homeless or rather walking together from town to town deep ministry, preaching and a lot of healings when He spoke to them about their very close and intimate friendship when He referred to Himself as the Vine and they were His branches! The Lord said to them, **"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches."** (John 15:4-5) And then not long after this He said to them, **"Greater love has no one than this, that**

someone lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:13-15)

This fits very, very well with what I have learned about true friendship: *real friends* are willing to be open and self-revealing with each other. Friends are willing to take risks within their friendships because mutual love and kindness are central to the relationship. In our New Testament Scripture lesson this morning in *Matthew 18*, we hear Jesus Christ teaching His followers about the nature of real friendship, discipleship and community building, which I will read some of it again to you again, but this time within the more personal language of the version called “The Message:” “I’m telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you’re not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God’s kingdom. What’s more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it’s the same as receiving me.” (Mtt. 18:3-5)

Why would our Lord and Savior, the Creator of the Universe say these words? Perhaps it is because deep trust and friendship was the cornerstone of the first mythical story in the Bible, in *Genesis*, in the story of the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve were so wonderfully trusting of each other, and also of God. They walked around naked, in fact, which also was symbolically true too—meaning, whatever they were thinking and dealing with in life they knew they could innocently trust God with it, whom they felt was often quietly walking nearby. Adam and Eve’s story was one of **uncomplicated trust**.

Isn’t it amazing that the first act within biblical mythology was the building of a sacred circle of friends within the circle of Creation? It was the creation or action of oneness within three—between God, Adam and Eve. They shared mutual vulnerability without any shame. They were kindred souls, playmates...they were friends. Man, woman and God. I agree with Diana Butler Bass who wrote in her very good book, *Freeing Jesus*, that spiritually humanity is quite a distance from the innocent mythological world of Eden, “but we see the qualities that make for friends most often in children.” (p. 9) Without trying to romanticize or pretend that sometimes kids do not always treat one other with dignity, as one write puts it in simple language, “A friend is someone fun to play with—and, someone you can trust.” (Sally McFague, *Models of God: Theology for An Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 160)

I agree with Dr. Bass that for most of us adults we have stilted, if not severely hampered, our inborn ability to reach out to others in friendship, as well as to easily be willing to take the risk of receiving friendship from others. Most of us allow our various hurts, emotional wounds and life’s many demands to take over our once highly active

and intuitive innocent ability to make friends. So, going back to our biblical mandate to perceive the Lord our God as our best friend, one in whom we can be at play with and can trust implicitly, we can re-learn this basic truth about the purpose of life being to make genuine friendships with many. In our culture today research tells us that most of us adults are lucky if we feel that we have just two close friends. Now, put that within the light that within our theology of charity, compassion and loving others as Christ loves us, we can hopefully begin to realize that making and connecting with good friends is one of the primary purposes of Creation itself.

As in the ancient world when Jesus lived, our world tends to herd us all into the direction of seeing friendship making as a smart political agenda—where we are taught to help our friends and hurt our enemies. But Jesus our Lord, Savior and Best Friend says, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.” Dr. Diana Butler Bass tells us, “Perhaps we could render His words afresh, which reads: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you return to first friendship—the way of trusting love and playfulness—you won’t know anything about the life God promises.’ Apparently,” Dr. Bass writes, “Jesus sees friendship in childhood as something to aspire to, not look down upon.” (p. 11)

In conclusion, now I’d like to invite all of you to turn toward the back portion of our worship bulletin today, to the page with the story titled, “You Are My Friends.” Everyone, please find it and read it silently while I read it aloud. In August 2019, at the beginning of the school year in the United States, a photo showing two little boys holding hands went viral. Conner, an autistic boy entering the 2nd Grade, was going to school alone for the first time. Although the bus trip went well, when he arrived at the school, he froze with fear and started to cry; he hid in a corner, unable to walk into the building. Christian, another boy, saw Conner and went to comfort him. Then he took Conner by the hand and led him inside the building.

“He found me and held my hand, and I got happy tears,” Conner later told a reporter when asked about Christian. “He was kind to me. I was in the first day of school, and I started crying. Then he helped me, and I was happy.”

Conner’s mother said, “Christian is Conner’s first real friend.” And then Christian’s mother explained, “They have an inseparable bond.”

*Char Adams, “Boy, 8, Comforts Classmate with Autism on First Day of School in Heartwarming Photo,” People.com, Aug. 28, 2019*

Now, let us look at the photograph of little Connor on the left (the boy with Autism) and his new friend, Christian (on the right). I don’t know about each of you, but honestly, out in today’s world, I find it easier to feel more like Connor than Christian—

afraid to boldly step into new situations and friendships, for fear of the risk of getting hurt. However, our New Church theology teaches us that God personally implants deep within us all heavenly “remains” of pure love—anchored and rooted in our psyches since we were born. These deep spiritual remains or remnants of pure love are what help us to recognize goodness, kindness, justice and mercy in life. And like it or not, **every human being** is gifted with God’s remnants of His life-force. So, listen again to the depth and power of God’s goodness that has been implanted inside of your inner self: **“The good of charity holds such feelings within it because it comes down from the Lord’s love towards the whole human race, a love which is ‘mercy’ because the whole human race is in distress.”**

Our Lord and Best Friend, Jesus Christ, gives us His command to be like these two boys, Christian and Connor. For if we love one another the way that the Lord loves us all, good friendship is the result. Yes, and this includes compassion, empathy, reaching out, going beyond what we imagine is possible—friendship with each other and with others who are longing to find a caring group of people like ours...and even more so, **friendship with God**. Throughout our spiritual growing journeys in life, Jesus will come to you in many forms, and sometimes He will ask you again, **“But who do you say that I am?”** Might you respond as children do so very well, saying: “You are my friend, Lord, and I am yours”?

**Truly, friendship is mutual, a hand extended and another reaching back!**  
Amen.

#### ***PASTORAL PRAYER***

Gracious Lord, thank you for always reaching out to us in very loving friendship, centered in loving trust. Help us to remember that your hand of such companionship reaches out to us on every day of the week. May we also, then, reach our hands out toward those who right now are hurting and crying because they want to find us this week and in the weeks to come. Amen.

**Children's Sermon** “Jesus Is My Best of Friends”