



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
April 7, 2019 Sermon

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## Be Like God: Be A Friend

Psalm 145:8-9, 13b-21; Matthew 5:43-48

### **Preface to First Scripture Lesson:**

What is God like?

That question seems at once the most urgent (how we answer is key to the kinds of lives we live), and the most difficult to answer (how can we, mere mortals, possibly know)?

Yes, of course we can—and should—turn to the Bible. But there the problem recurs. In some passages, we get various, lavish metaphors about what God is like—God is like a blazing fire that refines metal; God is like a launderer's soap that washes dazzling white. In other passages we're warned—by God, no less!—that we cannot know what God is like:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*

And sometimes the same passage does both: tells us that we can't know what God is like, and then tell us what God is like. Psalm 145 is one of those: In verse 3 we are told that God's greatness is unsearchable, but then starting in verse 8, the Psalmist seems to have done some successful searching, because the Psalmist then goes on to tell us what God is like. Listen now for God's word, Psalm 145 beginning with verse 8 . . .

### **Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:**

It was conventional wisdom in the ancient world: love your friends and hate your enemies. Love your friends: do them all the good you possibly can; hate your enemies: do them all the ill you possibly can. That is how to live a good life. Conventional wisdom: You can find it cited as such in Book 1 of Plato's *Republic* written some 380 years before Jesus' birth, and there too it is seen as being in need of correction.

In the passage I'm about to read, Jesus also challenges that conventional wisdom: "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . ." He tells his hearers—and tells us—that we must love our enemies. And if that weren't shocking enough, he tells us that we must do so in order to be children of God, to be like God, to be perfect as God in Heaven is perfect. Hard enough to love our enemies, but to be perfect as God is perfect? That seems impossible. More on how it is possible later, but in the meantime, reading from Matthew Chapter 5, verses 43-48 . . .

### **Sermon:**

If there's one home truth I learned from teaching ethics for over 20 years, it's this: most of us, most of the time, take our cue, ethically speaking, from what we perceive to be—what we have experienced as—the moral nature of the universe.

It's this simple: if someone believes that the universe is fundamentally pre-disposed towards goodness and kindness—if that has been that person's experience—then that person will tend to act with goodness and kindness. "Somebody helped me, gave me a leg up, so I should help others, give them a leg up."

If on the other hand, someone believes that the universe is indifferent—even hostile—to goodness and kindness in general and to oneself in particular, then that person will tend to act with indifference, even hostility, towards others and the world. “Nobody ever helped me, gave *me* a leg up, so why should I bother to help anyone else?”

This past week and today, *Les Misérables* or “Le Miz” as it’s come to be called), the Broadway musical based on Victor Hugo’s novel, has been playing at the Schuster Center. Even if you didn’t see it this time, you may have seen the play or the movie before, or at least know the outline of the story.

The setting is Paris, in the early 1800’s. The protagonist, one Jean Valjean, has spent 19 years in prison at hard labor—and for what? For stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister and her children who were starving. When, at last, after 19 years, he is released, he says (Ok, he sings: it’s a musical) this:

When they chained me and left me for dead  
Just for stealing a mouthful of bread  
For I had come to hate the world  
This world that always hated me  
Take an eye for an eye!  
Turn your heart into stone!  
This is all I have lived for!  
This is all I have known!

Most of us, most of the time, take our cue, ethically speaking, from what we perceive to be—what we have experienced as—the moral nature of the universe. And Jean Valjean is no exception.

But then, soon after his release, as he lives on the streets, hungry and scorned (his yellow passport identifies him as a former convict), a catholic priest, known as “Monseigneur Bienvenu” (the name means, “welcome”) takes him in, feeds, him and gives him a place to sleep. And in return, Valjean sneaks off in the middle of the night with almost all of the Monsignor’s household silver.

For I had come to hate the world  
This world that always hated me  
Turn your heart into stone!  
This is all I have lived for!  
This is all I have known!

Valjean is soon caught by the police, and in his desperation, tells them that the priest *gave* him the silver. Not believing him for a minute, the police drag him back to the priest, and then—and this is the famous scene, the one everyone remembers—the Monsignor comes out holding two silver candlesticks (the two most valuable pieces in an otherwise modest home) in his hands, singing:

That is right. I did give it to him.  
But my friend you left so early  
Surely something slipped your mind  
You forgot I gave these also  
Would you leave the best behind?

With this one act, the monsignor offers a new possibility, and a new life, for Valjean. The possibility that perhaps the world does not hate him after all, that perhaps indifference, hostility, and hatred do not lie at the heart of the universe, that perhaps, instead, love and grace do.

It is a possibility that stays with Valjean for the rest of his life, an action that changes him forever (“God has raised you out of darkness,” the Monsignor sings to Valjean, “I have bought your soul for God!”). Because through all his ups and downs, through all his subsequent struggles, (and he has a lot: the musical runs to three hours; the novel, 1500 pages), Valjean can never look on the suffering

of others with indifference. Time and time again, he will risk his freedom—he lives in kind of a self-constructed witness protection program—and his life to help those who suffer.

Of course, through all of that, the universe does not always treat Valjean with the goodness and the kindness that the Monsignor did. Hardly. In fact, too often the universe seems to operate on the principle that no good deed should go unpunished, since every act of kindness on Valjean's part imperils his freedom and causes him to suffer more. But eventually he earns the love and reverence of his adopted daughter and her husband-to-be (through his sacrifices, they become a kind of new Adam and new Eve); indeed, he earns the admiration of all who truly know him, and in the end, is rewarded with the favor of heaven.

That one action on the part of the Monsignor stays with Valjean the rest of his life, as do the candlesticks. With that one action of love and grace, the Monsignor changed Valjean forever. He could no longer believe that the world hated him. Nor could he believe that the world was a mixed bag, sometimes treating you well, sometimes, badly; a world in which you have both friends and enemies, and you must love your friends and do good by them and hate your enemies, and do ill by them). NO: Instead, what Valjean comes to believe, what he comes to live by, and what his life comes to exemplify, is that love—that friendship—lies at the heart of the universe.

"God is friendship," so said the 12th-century Cistercian monk Saint Aelred of Riveaulx, who begins his treatise on friendship by citing all the ancient proverbs, all the ancient wisdom, about friendship. He then states that the Biblical proclamation, "God is love," is best understood as "God is friendship," not because God is not love, but because friendship is that form of love that best describes God, both in God's being and in God's relationship to us.

First, in God's being: "God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit," writes the theologian Robert Jenson. And what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit is friendship. Think about it: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each is perfectly unique and yet at the same time, together, they are a perfect unity. Well, that's friendship. In its highest form, friendship is a perfect union of two (or more) in which each of us becomes uniquely, perfectly him or herself.

And if you run through that ancient wisdom about friendship as Aelred does, you'll hear this:

A friend is a second self, another me.

Friendship makes us one.

Friends want the same thing:

A friend always wants what is good for his friend, and more than anything else, wants that good simply for his friend's own sake.

Friends spend time together.

Friends share all things in common:

True friendship knows no end; it is forever.

And so you can see that all these apply, and apply pre-eminently, to the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And where a proverb doesn't apply to the triune God, it's only because it refers to some feature of our humanity not shared by God ("Friends have two bodies, but only one soul," for example).

So if you want to know what God is like, here it is: God is friendship. Of course the friendships we know on earth are only images, and partial ones at that, of the divine friendship. So it is also true for God to say to us: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways."

And yet, even here, maybe especially here, in friendship, God's ways *do* become our ways. Because God is also friendship in a second sense, that is, in relation to us. The circle of friendship that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not a closed circle but an open one. God comes to us in Jesus not only to share our world with us (friends share all things in common), but also to take away the sins of the world (a friend wants what is good for the friend simply for the friend's own sake). And he does this by paying the price of sin, which is death, for us. And so, the bar of sin being taken away, we are welcomed into the friendship of God. Jesus says to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, but now I call you my friends."

So God does for us in Jesus Christ what the Monsignor did for Valjean by giving him the candlesticks. (In fact, the latter is a symbolic representation of the former: "I have raised you out of darkness—I have bought your soul for God!" is true for both what the Monsignor did for Valjean, and Jesus does for us). Jesus in his incarnation and earthly ministry, in his death and resurrection, redeems us, bringing us into friendship with God, one another, and the world, and thereby showing us that friendship lies at the heart of the universe.

The problem is that it doesn't always seem that way. The problem is that too often the universe seems to operate on the principle that no good deed should go unpunished. After all, look where being our friend, where coming to the world in friendship, got Jesus: nailed to a cross. "You are my friends," Jesus says to his disciples, "if you do as I command you: and this is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you." In other words, "To be like God, be like me; love one another as I have loved you: this is how you will be children of God; this is how you will be like God; this is how you will participate in the perfection of God, how you will be perfect as God in heaven is perfect—by being friends to one another and to the world as I have been a friend to you." Which sounds wonderful, until we remember that Jesus also said to his friends, "Pick up your cross, and follow me."

The promise given to us—our only true comfort—is this: that we will never be alone in that suffering. God is with us. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis has the devil, Screwtape, say this: *Our cause [that would be the devil's cause] is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will [that would be God's will], looks round upon a universe from which every trace of God seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.*

Jesus, dying on the cross, cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And yet he still obeys to the end, never bowing to the temptation—hurled up at him as a dismissive taunt—to get himself down from there. To the very end, he lives as if God's friendship lies at the heart of the universe—especially when it seems like it doesn't. And so he dies on the cross, alone.

And so we are not alone, even in our most acute suffering, even when we feel most abandoned, even the hour of our death, we are not alone. Richard John Neuhaus puts it this way: *In the experience of abandonment by God we are most securely embraced in the love of God.*

*This love of God is the very life of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the love of the Father that incorporates the godforsakenness of the Son by the power of the Spirit. ["It is finished," Jesus says from the cross.] What is definitively "finished" is the power of division to divide, of separation to separate. From now on, in the abandonment of Christ, the alone are never alone. That is because, as paradoxical as it may sound, aloneness is no longer alone, but has been brought into the good company, [the friendship], of God.*

Most of us, most of the time, take our cue, ethically speaking, from what we perceive to be—what we have experienced as—the moral nature of the universe. And this is the moral nature of the universe: we are not alone; God is Friendship.

Thanks be God through Jesus Christ—our Lord and our friend.  
Amen.