

Sermon 09-21-2025
Clashing Friendship – Rev. Markus Wegenast
2 Peter 3:14-18

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish, ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also, our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist^[e] to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.^[f]

1)

The passage from 2 Peter we just heard is rich and has many deep themes. Salvation, misuse of scripture, lawlessness, eternity – these are all heavy topics. You may wonder: ‘What does this all have to do with friendship?’ which is what this month’s message series is about. The background of the words we just heard is even heavier: Today’s passage follows instructions about Christ’s second coming and the future judgment on the earth. That makes it even harder to discover any theme that may relate to friendship – doesn’t it?

Speaking of friendship. I came across a video clip where a pastor preached a fiery sermon about the fear of the Lord. He lamented that so many pastors today only emphasize God as friend but miss to point out that God is also our judge and not only our personal judge but the judge of the whole world. He lamented that we are losing our reverent fear of God.

I watched that clip and thought: Oh my, I hope this man is not coming across our YouTube channel and discover our message series on friendship. Though, actually, I hope he does, I think he can learn some very helpful things 😊

I don’t mean to make fun of a pastor colleague. That is neither fair nor helpful.

I do believe that we cannot possibly overemphasize God’s desire to be our friend. God proofed his friendship desire with us on the cross on which Jesus died and that’s why we have powerful hymns like “What a friend we have in Jesus.”

Today, though, I invite you to be brave and accept that the Bible also contains messages that invite us to reflect about our reverent fear of God. Of course, the strong conviction that we have a great friend in Jesus does not take away the fact that Jesus is also our judge. Here is my question for you:

How do you see your friendship with God when you consider him as your judge?

This is not an easy question, but I believe we don't need to run away from it. On the contrary. I believe that embracing this question will ultimately strengthen our friendship with God in Jesus Christ.

There are two views of God that clash here: the loving God who's always on our side, and the almighty God who is our judge who commands us to be on his side.

These views are not exclusive of each other, they do not contradict each other, they just clash! This is what makes our friendship with God so very special. This makes our friendship with Jesus so special, he is both friend and Lord.

Jesus is both friend and Lord

That's pretty unique, isn't it? How many friends do you have that are at the same time your Lord? There is really only one!

If this is true for Jesus, this is also true for God. And if you think of God as your heavenly father it is not all that foreign to bring the clashing elements of affirmation and judgment together. In God we have both the one who is fully for us and who can at the same time be very corrective. Think of your parents...

Some of you have parents that are still alive, some of us have already bid our farewells to our parents. Parents typically have to fulfill both clashing roles: They are in love with us, but they also are the ones who discipline and rebuke us. Without any discipline they would not do as much of a favor.

I'm not trying to make light of parenting styles that are more anti-authoritarian in nature – let me just illustrate this, I hope this illustration works for you:

Imagine you see your 3 year old play with a metal wire near a hot outlet in your house. You see your three year old getting closer and closer to the outlet ready to push the wire into the outlet. You can't tell me you are just standing there saying something like: "Oh my little pumpkin, what are you doing there with that wire, now that is not such a good idea to put it in the hot outlet, why don't you come here and play with something else away from the dangerous outlet..."

No!

You would run to your child, and you would scream and knock that wire out of your child's hand, so your child is safe. You'd say "no! – Don't do this – this is a bad idea." You would not worry for a moment that your child's feelings might be hurt by your harsh reaction. Not a moment!

I think this is how we can also understand the clashing pair of love and judgment when it comes to our friendship with God. When we have a healthy fear of the Lord our friend it is for a benefit – it helps us to live better and safer in a complicated and dangerous world.

In today's reading we heard that:

"...some things in [scripture are] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures." – 2 Peter 3:16b

It is always tempting to smooth out Bible passages that we find are too strong. But we should not do that, we should not twist Bible passages just because they are uncomfortable. Sometimes the best things in life happen when we are willing to stand something that initially makes us uncomfortable. It's for a good purpose, it leads to stability in life (V. 17), it gives us something to hold on to.

I hope you are not too uncomfortable to think about a clashing aspect in your friendship with God. His love and his justice can certainly clash but in this clash something beautiful is happening and sometimes we have to be patient to understand how these two pairs play out in our discipleship. And what did we hear in today's scripture lesson? Patience with God means salvation!

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2)

We bravely looked at a clashing aspect in our friendship with God: his love and his justice. Let's now focus on how clashes can happen in the friendships of us people. There is something rather interesting happening in today's scripture passage on an inner-human perspective:

The apostle Peter, the greatest of the 12 disciples, talks a bit about his relationship with another great apostle, the Apostle Paul. Paul was not one of the 12 disciples but ultimately the most consequential of all the apostles.

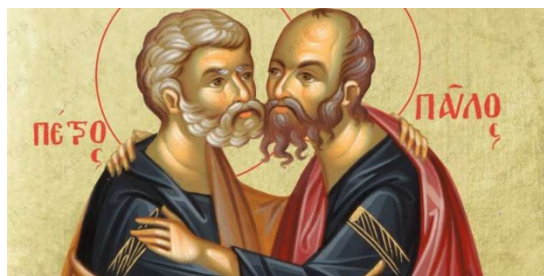
Did you catch how Peter is writing about his friend Paul?

"...our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand..." – 2 Peter 3:15bf

'Beloved Brother...', 'Some of the things Paul wrote are hard to understand.' This may seem like an unimportant side note in the Bible, but it actually points to an interesting issue regarding clashing friendships.

First of all, there is a sense of relief that one of Jesus' close friends, Peter himself, had a hard time understanding everything Paul wrote in his letters. If you have ever attempted to read and understand the first 11 chapters of Romans you know what I'm talking about. And it's not just Romans, Paul's writings in general have some hard to understand parts at times. (Comforting for our Disciple I&II participants!)

More importantly however is the fact that Peter calls Paul his "beloved brother. "



Here you see a very old image, about 1,500 years old from the Byzantine period. It's a repainted copy of the original. Peter to the left, Paul to the right traditionally depicted bald. It's meant to show their friendship and unity to encourage the church in times of early divisions and fights...

Peter and Paul were two huge pillars of the early church, but they were also quite different. Peter was a simple fisherman. Many scholars of the Bible are amazed that someone like him could write eloquent letters like 1 and 2 Peter. Some say he only could have done that with the help of a writing assistant who put his ideas into beautiful Greek words. Peter was a blue collar guy. As a disciples of Jesus, he was impulsive and not always very thought through...

Paul on the other hand was the classical scholar. He was seminary trained if you will, in the PhD category. He too could be a bit erratic at times but contrary to Peter he was not an early follower of Jesus – on the contrary. After his academic training he became a chief persecutor of the Christian church. He only became an apostle after the risen Jesus did a big conversion miracle in his life.

Peter and Paul clashed radically with each other before Paul's conversion – I mean, Paul tried to kill Peter and the early church. And even after his conversion, after Peter and Paul had become friends, the two of them would have clashes with each other. The one that is most famously recorded in the New Testament (Galatians 2:11-14) is when Paul rebuked Peter publicly for his behavior at an occasion in Antioch. Peter was distancing himself from non-Jewish Christians during a meal when other Jews showed up because that was a very controversial thing for Jews to do. But Paul had argued so strongly that non-Jews can just as much be followers of Jesus which Peter had already be formally agreed upon. So Paul felt Peter was hypocritical and he criticized him sharply...

Can you imagine what that was like when these two huge leaders of the Christian movement clashed with each other? A bit of pride and ego may have played out as well, just as it does in your and in my life.

We don't know how long they were mad at each other – that's why it is so important for me to point out that toward the end of his life, when Peter wrote (or had written) 2 Peter he was long over this argument. Paul is again his "beloved brother," he fully recognizes his writings and has no trouble that some of the things that Paul wrote are above his head and hard to understand for him.

Peter and Paul clashed, but the clash was not the defining mark of their friendship. Their broken relationship got resolved.

How do you resolve broken friendships?

How is God involved?

This is an important question. I have no doubt, we all have had or live in situations where some of our relationships get tested and scratched. What do you do to not let the scratch define the rest of your relationship? What do you do to let God move in with his justice and his love to restore what's broken? God is not a God who rejoices when we live in broken relationships – God is mending, God is tending to our wounds within our friendships because God created us for each other, not against each other.

Do you see how our 2 Peter passage addresses an important issue in our day and age in particular. We live in a time that is defined by divisions within our society.

I often hear that around the year 2010 our society started to move to sad new heights in ever increasing polarization. There was certainly never a time period when all people got along perfectly, there always were disagreements and divisions, but in the last decades this has gotten worse, not better. Would you agree with that?

Unfortunately, the divisions we have in our society also affect our friendships. It is harder today to be friends with someone who has radically different opinions and behaviors and cultures.

- Share about civil war in former Yugoslavia as an older example for how old divisions can flare up, seemingly overnight, and cause bad rifts. For decades people were friends with their neighbors of different ethnic origin but when the ugly force of division caught up with them they could only focus on what divided them, not what united them.

We may say “that was Eastern Europe” – that is not our situation but the principle we find anywhere. I told you a while ago that I consider it a huge strength that COS is a pretty mixed and diverse congregation. We have political and religious views that have a very wide range. Imagine someone or something sowed the seed of suspicion and distrust among us. Can you imagine how sad it would be if we started to look at each other no longer as beloved friends in Christ but instead started to focus on our differences? “Oh, the Pennston family, they have strong Republican roots, I better not hang out with them...” Or “Oh, the Chuckston's, they have bumper stickers about leftist causes on each of their family cars...”

Maybe you find it uncalled for that I point out the threat to our unity and friendship as a church family and in a way I hope it is uncalled for. But I also think we need to be realistic and see that what happens elsewhere can happen here – we are not

immune, we are not invincible – we all can get caught up in division. Not even Peter and Paul were immune.

That's why it is so good to focus on the question I just asked? "How do you resolve broken friendships? How is God involved?"

Are we willing to let God repair the rifts that can so easily arise? Are we willing to let God use it as a strength that we are a congregation with different people who don't think all the same and let it become a beacon of hope to the families and the world around us?

The Lord is patient with us as we learn how to repair rifts of suspicion and even outright arguments. In today's scripture lesson we heard that the Lord's patience with us is our salvation.

Sometimes friendships clash, sometimes there are sparks and it makes life tougher, but it also makes it much more interesting and much more beautiful. God means for us to be friends. He is our judge, and his judgment can happen in the form of discipline in this life yet, just as a parent disciplines their child to keep them safe.

We also have to make a judgment call for our lives and that is whether we embrace God's correction toward living in this world as friends.

Come, let God take your hand, let's all walk into God's good future holding his hand and in his patience learn how clashes are not the end – just opportunities for new beautiful beginnings. Amen.