

Say It to Me as a Friend
The Last Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, November 24, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

“Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.’ In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*”

Have you ever re-read a book, re-examined a painting, or re-watched a movie several years later and discovered that it is really about something totally different than what you thought the first time? When I first saw the movie, “The King’s Speech,” I thought it was the powerful story of one man, King George the Sixth of Britain, overcoming adversity, a persistent stutter. When I watched the movie again this week, I discovered that what it’s really about is a unique and unlikely friendship.

You see, the man who helped King George, known to his family as Bertie, overcome his stutter was an Australian commoner and wannabe actor named Lionel Logue. One night, Bertie came over to Lionel’s house just after Bertie’s father, King George the Fifth, died. Instead of having one of their speech therapy sessions, they have a drink together and have a real conversation. When Lionel brought Bertie a refill, Bertie said, “Thank you.” Lionel said, “What are friends for?” Bertie replied, “I wouldn’t know.”

Today is the Last Sunday of the Season of Pentecost. It is sometimes called Christ the King Sunday or The Reign of Christ. We’re not quite sure what to do with it since kingship seems to be such an outdated notion. After all, our nation got its start by throwing off a tyrant king. And kingship seems so male-centered in a world that has changed and is changing for the better. Even our mother country is ruled by a queen, not a king. And she’s been doing so for 67 years. But Jesus does talk a lot about kingdom. In fact, ushering in a new kingdom seems to be his major project. And if Jesus is the king of this kingdom, what sort of king is he?

In our lesson from Colossians, we learn that he is the kind of king in whom ‘God is pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven.’ The theme of our adult formation this year is: ‘Be reconciled.’ Earlier this fall, Scott shared that the best definition for the word ‘reconciled’ based on its language origins is this: ‘to become friends again.’ But that leaves us with a paradox. If Jesus is a king and if being reconciled, becoming friends again, is the real project of his kingdom, then by the very nature of the chasm between kings and their subjects, wouldn’t he have to answer Lionel’s question, ‘What are friends for?’ the same way Bertie did, “I wouldn’t know.”

A 12th century monk named Aelred spent his whole life exploring this paradox. Before he became a monk, Aelred served at the royal court of King David the First of Scotland. Like Lionel, he had the rare privilege of becoming a friend to a king. When Aelred left the court for the monastery, King David took the unusual step of giving him a formal and public farewell in which he said, ‘I remember the grace for which you now for the last time received me. I remember the good will

with which you granted all my requests. I remember the generosity you showed me. I remember the embraces and kisses with which you released me, not without tears, while all those present marveled.'

Aelred's experience of this unique relationship served as a springboard in writing his classic work entitled, *Spiritual Friendship*. In it, he quoted Jesus in giving voice to the evolution of his relationship with his disciples as he said to them: 'I no longer call you servants but friends.' Aelred saw our human friendships as extensions of Jesus's friendship with us as he wrote: 'In friendship we join honesty with kindness, truth with joy, sweetness with good will, and affection with kind action. All this begins with Christ, is advanced through Christ, and is perfected in Christ. The ascent does not seem too steep or too unnatural, then, from Christ's inspiring the love which we love a friend to Christ's offering himself as the friend we may love, so that tenderness may yield to tenderness, sweetness to sweetness, and affection to affection.'

For Lionel and Bertie, their friendship had to weather some hard truths and terrible storms before they reached this level of affection. Lionel pushed Bertie a little too hard to see the possibilities within himself. Bertie broke off their friendship and Lionel later went to the palace to apologize. Bertie sent word that he was too busy to see Lionel. Later, Bertie went to Lionel's home and offered his apology. Their relationship broke again when Bertie learned that Lionel had no official credentials in speech therapy, Lionel had never claimed such credentials, but Bertie had always assumed he was a doctor. Once again, they found a way to reconcile.

When Bertie became king, he was called upon to give the most important speech of his life to the British people as they entered World War II to fight for their very existence. Lionel set up the radio room for the speech such that it was just the two of them. Twenty seconds before the fateful speech, Lionel looked at Bertie and said, 'Forget everything else and just say it to me. Say it to me as a friend.' After Bertie gave his triumphant speech, Lionel addressed him for the first time as 'Your majesty.'

Perhaps it was his way of saying friendship precedes kingship, not the other way around. In order to become the cosmic Christ, the one over thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers, Jesus first had to go to the tomb of his friend Lazarus and weep.

This coming week, we will offer prayers of thanksgiving around tables overflowing with food and with people we love. We have much to be grateful, especially the friendships, some that are surprising and unexpected, that bring us deep and lasting joy. How do we even begin to thank Jesus for them? Just say it to him as a friend. *Amen*.