

A CONTEMPORARY MODEL: JESUS AS FRIEND

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For Christianity, the discipline of theology seeks to articulate concepts of Jesus Christ which will be understandable to the contemporary church and world. Theology engages various tools which give concrete ways of expressing the being of Christ by bringing to light an aspect of Christ's person which can speak to us today. It is a rediscovery of language and expressions for Christ which can have significant meaning for us today. One such tool is a model or paradigm. A model is an exemplary or figurative way of describing Christ.

This essay will offer a discussion of a contemporary model for Jesus, the model of Jesus as Friend, as it comes to us from the modern theologians, Jürgen Moltmann and Sallie McFague. First, we will define the Model of Jesus as Friend; second, explain this model for human relationships; and third, give an interpretation of this model for the contemporary life of the Church.

The Model of Jesus as Friend

The model of Jesus as Friend defines Jesus as one who offers affirmation of humanity as he works to bring about relationships which are characterized by mutuality and friendship in divine love and freedom — Jesus as Friend is a parable of God as Friend. Jesus as Friend is One who identifies with humanity in its suffering and joins with humanity in mutual empowering of persons to bring about a better existence.

Jürgen Moltmann discusses this concept of Jesus as Friend. For Moltmann, Jesus illustrated friendship in his life and thus Jesus is a Friend to humanity. Moltmann reinterprets the traditional offices of Christ as prophet, priest and king in terms of Jesus' friendship. As a prophet, Jesus brings the gospel of the Kingdom to the poor and becomes the friend of tax-collectors and sinners. As the high priest, he offers himself "for many" and consummates his love by dying as a friend for a friend. As the exalted Lord, he liberates humanity from its bondage and allows for humanity to be friends for others. As the one who is glorified, he intercedes with the Father for the world. In Jesus' name, friendship with God is possible through prayer.¹

For Moltmann, the many-faceted work of Christ, which in the doctrine of Christ's three-fold office was presented in terms of sovereignty and function, can be taken to its highest point in his friendship. The joy which Christ communicates and the freedom which he brings as prophet,

priest and king find better expression in the concept of friendship than in the ancient titles. Moltmann states, "For in his divine function as prophet, priest and king, Christ lives and acts as a friend and creates friendship."²

In the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as "friend" in two important passages. In Luke 7:34: "The Son of man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!'" Jesus accepted public sinners. Jesus' striking friendship with sinners and tax-collectors lies in his joy in God, in the future and in human existence. Jesus becomes the friend of sinners in that he reveals God's friendship to the unlikeable, to those who have been treated badly or alienated from society.

In John 15:13, Jesus declares himself to be the friend of his disciples. When he calls them to himself, he calls them into a new life of friendship: "Greater love has no man that this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." Here, the sacrifice of one's own life for one's friends is the highest form of love. Love manifests itself here as friendship. When he cites friendship as the motive for Jesus' sacrificing his life, John means a love that exists, that is faithful unto death. He means a knowing sacrifice for the sake of friends' lives.³

Through Jesus' death, the disciples become friends of Jesus forever. They remain in his friendship, if they follow his commandments and become friends to others. The relationship therefore of men and women to God is no longer simply a dependent, obedient relation of servants to their Master. Nor is it simply the relation of human children to a heavenly Father. For Moltmann, in the fellowship of Jesus, the disciples become friends of God. In the fellowship of Jesus, they no longer experience God only as Lord, nor only as Father; rather they also experience him in his innermost nature as Friend.⁴

Moltmann defines Jesus as Friend who demonstrates God as Friend. Sallie McFague understands God as Friend who illustrates Jesus as Friend. She brings to the fore the model of God as Friend. McFague seeks images of God which speak of the freeing love of God, the new quality of relationship in Jesus which fosters freedom over against structure. McFague states:

The images which tumble from the mouths of those experiencing the liberating love of God are not meant to describe God so much as to suggest the new quality of relationship being offered to them. Hence, religious metaphors and the models that emerge from them are not pictures of God but images of a relationship; as such, they are nonrestrictive and highly particular.⁵

McFague offers the model of God as Friend to express God's unique relationship of freedom with humanity. She refers to the use of the metaphor of friend in the Bible. In terms of the Old Testament, the inclusion of all Israel as the friend of God is seen in Isaiah who states, "But you, Israel my servant, you Jacob whom I have chosen, race of Abraham my friend" (Isaiah 41:18). Friendship with God is also suggested in biblical passages referring to companionship or fellowship with God (Joshua 1:15), partnership with God (Hosea 2:23) and in the New Testament, (I John 1:3, John 17:21, I Cor. 3:9). Like Moltmann, McFague points out Jesus' use of friend in two passages: in Jesus' saying that there is no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13), and in Jesus' reference to the Son of Man as the friend of tax-collectors (Matt. 11:19, Luke 7:39).⁶

For McFague, the model of God as Friend takes on special significance in terms of Jesus' suffering for humanity. She states that if one of the most meaningful contemporary understandings of the atonement is the suffering of God for and with the pain and oppression of the world, then the model of God as Friend takes on special significance. Jesus in his life and especially at his death is a parable of God's friendship with humanity at its most profound level. McFague states that this is evident in Jesus' parables. In parables such as the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan and the Great Supper, Jesus welcomes outcasts and turns the conventionally righteous away. In Jesus' reading from Isaiah 61:1-2 of the Beatitudes in Luke, he proclaims good news to the poor, release to the captives and liberty for the oppressed. The most dramatic example of Jesus' identification with the sufferings of humanity is seen in Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners and tax-collectors.

McFague discusses the passage in Matt. 11:19 in the same way Moltmann discussed this idea in Luke 7:34: Jesus as a friend of tax-collectors and sinners. McFague makes the observation that Joachim Jeremias, Gunther Bornkamm and Norman Perrin agree that Jesus' practice of eating with the outcasts of his society was both the central feature and the central scandal of his ministry. Jesus' table-fellowship both shocked his enemies and impressed his followers because eating with others was one of the closest forms of intimacy for Jews of that time and conveyed honor to those chosen. One did not eat with the ritually unclean, with Gentiles and with those in despised trades; hence, for Jesus to eat with such peoples, to be called "the friend" of such people was a scandal to most people as well as a form of radical acceptance for his friends at table. The acceptance of the outcasts and the oppressed at table is a concrete enactment of forgiveness of sins. Jesus extends forgiveness and

salvation to the outcasts of society.

I affirm with McFague that Jesus in his friendship with outcasts and sinners is a model of friendship with God. Jesus as parable enacts God's friendship with humanity. The God of Jesus is the One who invites humanity to table to eat together as friends.⁷ Jesus is a parable of God as Friend in his befriending of sinners and outcasts.

Furthermore, McFague points out as did Jürgen Moltmann that Jesus as a friend lays down his life for humanity (John 15:12-15). If Jesus is the friend who identifies with the sufferings of the oppressed in his table-fellowship against all expectations and conventions, so also is he the one who in his death lays down his life for his friends. Jesus' way of expressing his love for his friends also ought to be our way of expressing gratitude for such love — we too must lay down our lives by the example of Jesus. Thus, we are no longer called "servants" but "friends," doing for others what our friend did for us. Jesus is a Friend of humanity even unto death.⁸

The Model of Friend for the Ethic of Friendship

This model of Jesus as Friend understands Jesus as one who suffers with humanity yet one who seeks to work within creation for a new humanity; that is, to foster new relationships beyond the sufferings of humanity which then opens a new creation of wholeness, equality and mutuality. The model of Jesus as Friend affects new relationships between humanity. The model of Friend offers an ethic of friendship. Friendship in human relationships in terms of freedom and mutuality is indigeneous to the model of Jesus as Friend.

Let us draw now upon Jürgen Moltmann's expression of this idea of friendship in freedom. For Moltmann, friendship is a deep human relation that arises out of freedom, consists in mutual freedom and preserves this freedom. Moltmann contends that we are not by nature free, but become so only when someone likes us. Friendship combines respect with affection. One does not have to submit to a friend. One neither looks up to nor down at a friend. One can look a friend in the face. In friendship one experiences oneself, just as one is readily accepted and respected in one's own freedom. Moltmann states, "When one person likes another, then the one respects the other in his or her individuality, and delights in his or her singularities as well."⁹

Friendship exists without compulsion or constraint. It is freedom to help, to suffer with, to confide in and to share joy with a friend. Freedom in friendship overcomes existing social structures and enables humanity to be whole persons in the relationship of friendship. Moltmann declares that between friends there rules no prejudice that

defines one and no ideal image after which one must strive. A friend is the new person; the true person, the free person. Friendship is open respect and affection for each person as a whole human being.¹⁰

In Jesus Christ as the Friend, friendship is not a closed circle among peers. In Jesus' incarnation, in the cross and in his friendship with sinners and tax-collectors, there is an inclusivity of humanity as friends of Jesus. Moltmann contends that because of Christ, Christian friendship cannot be lived within a closed circle of the faithful but must be open in public affection and respect for others. Jesus' friendship for his disciples, for sinners and tax-collectors is not a private secluded friendship but within the circle of Jesus, there is an openness, inclusivity of Jesus toward all humanity. It is open friendshipⁿ

Jesus as Friend fosters an understanding of mutual friendship for humanity that is characterized by affirmation of the whole personhood of the individual in love. Jesus demonstrates this love in friendship in light of his messianic mission as the Christ. Jesus as the Christ, as the Friend of all humanity, inaugurates new life that is characterized by love. This love is exemplified by Jesus for his friends, especially Mary, Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38ff, John 11, 12).

The story of Lazarus in John 11:3-44 illustrates Jesus' love for his friend, Lazarus, as well as for Mary and Martha. The Greek for love in the phrase in John 11:5 ("Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus") is **agapan**. It is Jesus' infinite divine love for humanity, male and female. It is illustrated here when Jesus demonstrates divine love for his friends (male and female). In 11:3, 11, 36, the Greek for love is **philein**; 11:3: "Lord, he whom you love is ill," and 11:36: "See how he loved him," and 11:11: "Our friend (**philos**) Lazarus has fallen asleep." The Greek verb for love, **phileo**, signifies Jesus' love or affection accorded to his friends, especially Lazarus. It is love in friendship. Raymond Brown states that **philein** and **philos** are used in 11:3, 11, 36 with the same significance as **agapan** in 11:5.¹²

I concur with Brown that these two verbs are used equally to express Jesus' divine love in friendship. The verbs, **philein** and **agapan**, illustrate Jesus' great infinite love for his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Jesus' friendship with humanity is of an infinite divine quality of love. Friendship for Jesus is characterized by divine love, **agapan**. Jesus demonstrates this in his life of ministry, death and resurrection. He calls it into being among humanity, among men and women. Friendship is not only affection but it must embody the divine love Jesus demonstrated with his friends. In Jesus, divine love is exemplified in friendship.

I am discussing love, **agapan**, as it is primarily understood in the

Johannine literature because here Jesus' divine love is expressed most concretely in terms of friendship. John exemplifies the divine love of Jesus as Friend. It is love which is the character of friendship. John emphasizes the love of Christ for those whom God has given him, for his friends. Through the Son, the love of God reaches the world and humanity. This love is divine; it reaches the world through Christ (John 17:23ff, 14:21ff). Jesus exemplifies this divine love in his circle of friends, for his disciples and for humanity (John 16:27b, 21:15-17). In John 13:23 and 15:13-16 **agapan** is used for love which indicates that Jesus calls his disciples, friends, in divine love.¹³ Jesus portrays the divine love of God and calls humanity to exemplify his love. Humanity, male and female, will show themselves to have the same friendship Jesus exemplified for his friends, if humanity loves as Jesus did.

In the Johannine letters, the divine love of Jesus is put forth as a reality for the life of fellowship with one another in Christ. I John states, "We love because he first loved us," (I John 4:19, **agapan**). In exemplifying this divine love with one another, humanity reflects this divine love in relationships, they exemplify the relationship that Jesus established with humanity in giving God's divine love: they become friends of God, and friends with one another (**philoï**)¹⁴ John III states, "Peace be to you. The friends (**philoï**) greet you. Greet the friends every one of them" (III John 15). In this mutual salutation, believers are friends of God and friends with one another in divine love which characterizes friendship. From the model of Jesus as Friend, there emerges a new ethic for human relationships: Friendship in freedom and mutuality through Jesus' divine love that can affirm whole personhood within the mutual sharing of God's divine love one to the other.

The Model of Friend for Church

The Church is the Community of Jesus Christ as Friend which can be the context for the ethic of friendship to be actualized (as in John). The Spirit of Jesus Christ as Friend penetrates the community of Christ to bring about a freedom and love which fosters affirmation and wholeness of personhood in friendship. In Christ, humanity is a new creation. E.S. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage declare that the Pauline letters give testimony to the fact that women and men are equally "new creations in Christ" (II Cor. 5:17). This comprehensive renewal implies equal worth of male and female in Christ. Therefore, Gerstenberger and Schrage contend that in the early period of the Church, men and women were called to service as "fellow workers of God" (I Cor. 3:9). During and after Easter, there are both men and women active in the Spirit of Christ in the Christian community. The Christian community

is characterized by mutuality and partnership, friendship. Gerstenberger and Schrage state, "There is rather a community of sisters and brothers based on free co-operation among members with organizational forms of partnership."¹⁵

There is openness and co-operation between men and women in the Church. Paul states, "my fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 16:3) or "these women . . . have labored side by side with me in the gospel" (Phil. 4:3). Therefore, men and women freely participate in the activity of the Christian community in the Spirit of Christ (I Cor. 12:4ff). Freedom in Christ is actualized in the early Christian community for all humanity. There is here a mutuality and co-operation with one another in the freedom and spirit of Christ. Jesus Christ as Friend bestows upon the Christian community his divine love which fosters friendship and mutuality among humanity in his name by the power of his Spirit. Through the power of Jesus Christ as Friend, there is in the Christian community, an affirmation of the wholeness of personhood. Jesus Christ as Friend bestows upon the Christian community a freeing love which fosters friendship and mutuality for humanity.

Therefore, I believe that the Church today can reflect that same freeing love of Jesus Christ for humanity. The Church today can help to foster friendship with humanity in the Spirit of Christ by exemplifying his divine love one to another in freedom and friendship. The Galatians 3:28 passage reflects the intent for freedom and wholeness of humanity in the divine love of Jesus as Friend of humanity for the Church and for the world. Patricia Remy states that the "real locus classicus for man and woman and indeed all humanity now redeemed in neighborly love for one another whether Jew or Greek, free or slave, male or female is Gal. 3:28."¹⁶

Moltmann's understanding of the Church emphasizes this point. He understands the Church as a fellowship of friends **Communio sanctorum** or **Congregatio sanctorum**. It is the commandment in which the Spirit of Christ can be actualized for the wholeness and freedom of all humanity in friendship. The Church as the fellowship of friends illustrates that the power of Christ goes beyond the boundaries of race, sex and class. Friendship in the fellowship of the Church is a new relationship which goes beyond the societal roles of those involved. Friendship is an open relationship which spreads love because it combines affection with respect for all persons. The freedom which springs out of friendship is freeing for new life itself. It is the affirmation of humanity in Jesus. Jesus is Friend to humanity, and humanity can be friends to one another in loving friendship in the community of friends, the Church. Moltmann states:

The **Congregatio sanctorum**, [the Church] the community of brethren is really the fellowship of friends who live in the friendship of Jesus and spread friendliness in the fellowship by meeting the forsaken with affection and the despised with respect.¹⁷

The Church represents the Spirit of freedom and friendship in love which Jesus as Friend inaugurates. Love and wholeness is grounded in the love of Jesus: it is given for humanity to share in a community in friendship. Jesus as Friend fosters love for humanity and for the Church in a Spirit of freedom and friendship.

FOOTNOTES

¹Jürgen Moltman, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, translated by Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 118-19.

²Ibid., p. 119.

³Jürgen Moltmann, *The Passion For Life* adapted translation by M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 56-57.

⁴Ibid., p. 57.

⁵Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology, Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 166.

⁶Ibid., p. 178.

⁷Ibid., pp. 180-81.

⁸Ibid., pp. 180-81.

⁹Moltmann, *The Passion For Life*, p. 51.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 51-53.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 60-63.

¹²Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 191.

¹³Ethelbert Stauffer, "Agapao" in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Vol. I. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 52-53.

¹⁴Gustav Stahlin, "Phileo" in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Vol. IX. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 165-66.

¹⁵E.S. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage, *Women and Man*, translation Douglas Scott (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1981), pp. 149, 157.

¹⁶Patricia Remy, "Karl Barth's Theology on Man and Woman," Incomplete Dissertation for the University of Basel, Switzerland, June 18, 1978, Section 3, p. 49.

¹⁷Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, pp. 316-317.