SUNDAY, OCTOBER 9, 1988

"GOD AS FRIEND"
(No. 3 in a Series on "The Statement of Faith")

John 14:15-17, 25-27
Acts 2:1-4

"God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the Church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races."

How can we describe the experience of God in our world and in our lives? Traditionally, we Christians have spoken of experiencing or knowing God in at least three ways, God as the Father (as a personal way of speaking of God as the creator and our creator), God as the Son (meaning God coming to us in Jesus), and God as the Holy Spirit (meaning God's presence within us and among us). We call this the Trinity.

In this sermon series in which we are using the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith as a guide, we have been considering some new and additional metaphors for talking about ~~the~~ and understanding the experience of God in our world and in our individual lives--almost a new kind of Trinity.

In the first sermon in the series, I suggested that in addition to thinking about God as a loving father, we need also to think about God as a loving mother. Then in the second sermon in the series, when we talked about how God has come to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the metaphor of God as lover was suggested. God so loved the world, that God came to us in Jesus of Nazareth. Today I want to suggest that in addition to God as mother and God as lover, we also experience God as friend. God is a friend in that God is always present with us and that's a large part of what we mean when we talk about God as the Holy Spirit.

Most of us are familiar with the hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The words of the first verse are: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear; what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer. Oh what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer." Maybe we need another hymn with the words, "What a friend we have in the Holy Spirit." Actually, we experience God as friend both in the person of Jesus and through the experience of the Holy Spirit. In this sermon, I will be concentrating especially on God as friend as known through the Holy Spirit.

First, let's look at this matter of friendship and try to define it and then we'll be able to

see more clearly why "friend" is a good metaphor to apply to God and the Holy Spirit.

It has been said by some, although I don't agree, that "unlike mothers and lovers, friends are unnecessary." The reason some have said this is because we all have or have had mothers--in that there is no choice. And even falling in love seems to have a kind of destiny about it, but friends choose to be together. Of all of our human relationships it is the most free.

But who or what is a friend? Common usage does not help much. Someone says, "It's nothing serious: they are just friends," and "She had many acquaintances but few friends." We seem to sense there is something special about friendship but we are not sure exactly what it is.

The most basic ingredient of friendship is trust. All friendship is built on trust between human beings. As noted earlier, we choose our friends and they choose us. Trust can never be forced, nor can friendship.

Circles of friendship, therefore, are always a threat to any form of authoritarian control, because friendship cannot be organized or controlled.

Most basically, one chooses to be with a friend simply because one likes the person, and one

allows one's friends "to be," just the way they are. Friendship is a joyful free attraction between two or more people. Children usually know a friend instinctively; a friend is someone fun to play with--and someone you can trust. Attraction, joy, freedom, trust: a friendship is a relationship that at one level is simply mutual delight in the presence of each to the other.

Is it any surprise then, that the metaphor of God as friend is frequent among the mystics, those who enjoy being in the presence of God, and who undertake meditative exercises to achieve such closeness?

In addition, friends most frequently have a common vision. C.S. Lewis states it succinctly: "Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest." Thus, the Quakers, known as the Society of Friends, have a common vision and work together because of it. In the deepest sense, all Christian congregations should be known as societies of friends.

Friendship fits between the cracks of life. It breaks through the little chunks where the sun was suppose to be forbidden, or seeps under locked doors. Friendship is one of the freest forms of association in most cultures. It cannot be reduced to an organizational chart. It can break all boundaries. Friendship often

defies our normal human logic. We even say, "How could those two be such close friends?" It doesn't make any sense.

It is no accident that eating together is the most common activity of friends, for the pleasure of good food and conversation with people one enjoys and trusts is symbolic of fulfillment at a very deep level.

Eating at the same table symbolizes equality and inclusiveness. That's why Jesus sitting at the same table with the sinners and outcasts of his time was such a scandal to many others. Jesus' invitation to the outsiders to join him as friends at the table became an enacted parable of God's friendship with humanity. That we can be friends with God is the most astounding possibility. As Sallie McFague puts it: "God as mother says, 'It is good that you exist;' God as lover says, 'You are valuable beyond all imagining;' God as friend says, 'Let us, all of us break bread together in fellowship and joy.'"

The activity of God as friend is not different from the work of God as mother or lover, but each metaphor emphasizes a unique aspect of God's total love for us and for the creation.

But how does this metaphor of God as friend relate to the more traditional way of talking about God's activity as the Holy Spirit?

Remember the Statement of Faith says, "GOD BESTOWS UPON US THE HOLY SPIRIT, CREATING AND RENEWING THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST, BINDING IN COVENANT FAITH PEOPLE OF ALL AGES, TONGUES AND RACES."

Let it be clear from the very beginning that the idea of the Holy Spirit is not some kind of abstraction which came out of a theologian's thinking. It's not a concept someone dreamed up. The Holy Spirit was first a fact of experience and then there was the attempt to describe the experience.

The early Christians after the resurrection knew they had received new energies, new power that they were not aware of before. They were convinced that God was present and working in and among them in a way they had not experienced before. First came the experience, then the attempt to describe it and name it.

The church chose to call this experience of the sustaining power of God, the Holy Spirit. It was a "creating and renewing power" as the Statement of Faith puts it. It was a power that helped mold a struggling group of discouraged followers of Jesus into a cohesive community--into a "society of friends."

When Jesus was with his disciples before his death and resurrection, he promised them that God would continue to sustain them and in a

fresh way. He said in effect, "I will no longer be present with you in the same way as I am now, but after I leave, the Spirit will come with power and will teach you all things." It is the faith of the Christian church that God still bestows upon us this Holy Spirit and to use our new metaphor, it is our experience of God in day to day life as a friend who is always with us. And this same Spirit is especially present among us when we are gathered together. It is no accident that when the Bible speaks of God's Spirit as being most active, it is always within the context of a community or group of persons.

We experience God as friend most intensely when we are with others with whom we have a common vision.

And there is another element in this matter of God's as friend. We experience God as friend not only when we are with others with whom we have a common vision, but we experience God especially as friend when we welcome into our midst the stranger, the outsider, the outcast, the one who is different.

In the New Testament stories we discover that one of the characteristics of early Christian hospitality is the unexpected presence of God in ordinary exchanges between human beings--and especially in exchanges with the stranger, the outcast, the outsider.

Thus the church is much more than a community of like-minded friends, it must also have at its very heart the inclusion of others, the different. As I have said over and over again from this pulpit--it is in the very nature of the church as modeled by Jesus, to be inclusive and not exclusive. And yet it is always the temptation of the church to want to be exclusive. It is the intention of God as friend to "bind in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races."

What is there in us human beings that makes us so much fear the outsider, the stranger, the person who is different from us? That such fear is deep within all of us, human and nonhuman, is well illustrated by animal territorial patterns and by our national boundaries. If friendly feelings are intrinsic to human beings, unfriendly ones certainly are as well.

I don't know the answer to the "why" of our fear, but it is the vision of our Christian faith that God is friend of all and we are to be also. And our faith reminds us that what we fear most and apparently are willing to kill and die for, namely the outsider, is not necessarily the enemy, but is rather only the stranger. And strangers need not be enemies. It has been said that "the city which forgets how to care for the stranger has forgotten how to care for itself."

So there we have it. God as friend is another way of speaking of God as Holy Spirit. And through God as friend or God as Holy Spirit, it is the witness of our faith that God is continually creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ and is binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races. God is bringing all of creation into greater harmony.

There is something about God's Spirit that abhors the many false distinctions and separations and exclusions that we human beings like to make. Thus a class church or one available to only one race or one class or is exclusive in any way is a sin against the Holy Spirit.

It is the witness of the Bible and our Christian faith that God as friend calls us to wholeness and to seeing the world and creation and all of us as interconnected and inter-related. God's Spirit is that spirit that draws us out of ourselves into openness, inclusion, love and acceptance. As St. Paul said, "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

Those other kinds of spirits which lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, dogmatism, are not of God. It is my hope that in First-Plymouth Church, God as friend will continue to create and renew us and will bind together in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races.

I also hope that we will continue to be a community of vision, a society of friends, where joy and awe, mystery and prayer can be found and that these will not distract us from the pain of the world, but empower us to take part in it and overcome it.

God as friend reminds us that we are not our own, and also that we are not on our own--God is with us in all things. AMEN.

Let us now join together in saying The Statement of Faith.