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St. James', Mt. Airy  
6/25/17

Pentecost 3/Proper 7A  
Genesis 21:8-21  
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17  
Romans 6:1b-11  
Matthew 10:24-39

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

*But I have called you friends,  
because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father.*

~ John 15:15b

Last week was the feast day/saint's day for Bernard Mizeki. He was born in 1861 in Portuguese East Africa, from which he fled to escape oppression. He soon after arrived in Capetown, South Africa where he was befriended and converted by Anglican missionaries. He was baptized on March 9, 1886 and by 1891 he was sent as a catechist for a pioneer mission in Mashonaland, which is in modern day Zimbabwe.

Mizeki was someone who was able to develop friendships and be a bridge between two worlds – a charism that ultimately marked him for martyrdom. In 1896 during an uprising of native peoples against Europeans and their African friends, he was warned to flee but refused to desert his converts at the mission station.

He was stabbed to death, his body was never found, and the exact site of his burial is unknown.

But a shrine near Mezeki's place of martyrdom attracts numerous pilgrims, and the Anglican Churches of Central and South Africa honor him as their primary native martyr and witness.<sup>1</sup>

In his wonderful book about the holy women and holy men we celebrate throughout the year, like Bernard Mizeki, The Rev. Sam Portaro writes that the word "friend" recurs frequently in the story of Mizeki's life, ministry, and martyrdom. It was his love of God, his European friends, and his native African friends, that led to his death.

His experience is a story of deadly friendship.<sup>2</sup>

Sam writes, "We have domesticated friendship too much. Merest acquaintances are called friends; friendships are useful to professional life and enhancements to social status. We seek as friends those who share our perspectives and reinforce our egos. Where are the robust friendships, the dangerous friendships, the life-changing friendships?"<sup>3</sup>

Our readings today, from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel, show us that friendship with God can indeed be a deadly friendship.

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In Genesis we see the climax of the tumultuous friendship between Sarah and Hagar – two strong women who are revered among the Abrahamic faiths.

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<sup>1</sup> Biographical info from *Holy Women, Holy Men*, page 432-433.

<sup>2</sup> Portaro, Sam, *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, pg. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Sarah was the wife of Abraham. Hagar was her handmaiden. The stories and traditions about these women abound and are varied in nature. One telling is that while Sarah was in the harem of Pharaoh in Egypt, that Hagar converted to faith in Sarah's God, and so she was given to her when she and Abraham left.

One thing is clear from our scriptural stories – the friendship between these two faithful women became deadly when Sarah, who was barren, gave Hagar to Abraham to bear him children.

Abraham took Hagar as a second wife. When she conceived she looked upon Sarah with contempt, and in turn Sarah dealt harshly with her. Hagar ran away into the wilderness of the desert to escape. It was by a spring that the Angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her to return to bear her son with Abraham.

Hagar's friendship with God deepened profoundly in the desert that day, for she was amazed that she was able to see God and remain alive, and so it is that she is the first person in the Bible to give God a name, calling God *El Roi* – which is translated *'the God who sees.'*

Hagar did return, and in time Sarah laughed when God promised her she would bear a son as well. Here is where our story picks up today – with Sarah's jealousy of the first born son, Abraham's confusion about what to do, and more promises from God.

*"Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba."<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 21:14, NRSV.

Hagar and Ishmael being cast out, God's promises notwithstanding, is heart wrenching. The desert is a dangerous place; in no time at all the water skin is dry, and death approaches.

*"Do not let me look on the death of the child."*

Hagar sat at a distance from Ishmael, lost in her lament, when she heard the voice of the angel of God. God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.

**Water is life.** It would continue – but never be the same, for friendship with God had transformed its unfolding and indeed Hagar herself. Her old life and self were dead, the ties were cut. Sarah would come to be honored by Jews and Christians as a mother of their faiths, and Hagar would come to be a matriarch within Islam – for it is through the line of Ishmael that the prophet Muhammad would come.

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*"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household"<sup>5</sup>*

Our Gospel from Matthew today makes it clear that to be Jesus' friend can be deadly.

This week's long passage brings together a number of sayings of Jesus to create a set of instructions for his friends before he sent them out on a mission.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 10:34-36, NRSV.

These were words intended for an audience hesitant to claim friendship with Jesus.<sup>6</sup> In both Jesus' time, and the time of Matthew's community, such hesitancy would have been understandable, for to be a friend of Jesus was potentially literally deadly.

In a society based on kinship and clan, on strict societal structures of honor and shame, to be cast out from one's family was tantamount to death.

And so it is that Jesus offered these words:

*Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Were these words of comfort to those who went looking for Jesus? Did they scare people away? Was this Jesus at his dramatic, over the top best? Or was this an acknowledgement of the timeless truth that to be his friend meant everything would change?

This is the way with God – from death new life always springs.

*For if we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.<sup>7</sup>*

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It is not a part of our lived reality, here – today in Mount Airy, that our friendship with Jesus is literally fatal.

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<sup>6</sup> Portaro, Sam, *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, pg. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 6:5, NRSV.

And yet this friendship is life-changing, introducing death in another guise. It changes us, converts us, challenges us, and confronts us. Friendship with Jesus brings death to old ideas and ways of being, and sets us in opposition to prevailing norms.<sup>8</sup>

In lived memory, this community of Christ experienced a break in which some folks left over disagreement about the inclusion of LGBTQ people in leadership in the church.

Those of you who stayed did the hard work of conflict resolution and healing, but I have had enough conversations to see that that experience left a scar, a reminder of broken relationship. And I can see the way it influences the current dynamic at St. James' – one of generous hospitality to all – but also a reticence to approach or dig too deep into issues that are likely divisive.

It is a balancing act – relationship/family/community – of committing to hold together the bonds of love, and also the biblical call to speak truth in love and to stand on the side of those in the margins rather than with the power of empire.

If we find that unsettling, then we can take comfort that we stand in a long line of followers of Christ who have been unsettled by the “good news.”

As Scholar and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The gospel is not a table knife, but a sword. It can set free and it can divide. The gospel is not pabulum. It is power stuff, powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties, but as frightening as it is, it is not finally to be feared.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Paraphrased from Portaro, Sam, *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, pg. 108.

<sup>9</sup> From the sermon “Family Values” in *Gospel Medicine*.

We know this because time and again throughout scripture – and indeed even in today’s Gospel – we are told *do not be afraid*.

Yet true friendship with God changes and transforms us, our families, and our communities in sometimes ‘deadly’ ways. Bernard Mizeki knew this, Hagar knew this, Jesus’ friends knew this – we must always remember it.

This may not be easy, but it is not the end, because we are alleluia people, and I give thanks for the death that promises resurrection life.

~ AMEN ~