“You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15.14)

“I do not call you servants any longer, . . . but I have called you friends.” (John 15.15)

Well, today is the big day! No, I don’t mean Groundhog Day. It actually is Groundhog Day, but that’s not the point. No one looks forward to Groundhog Day, not even the groundhogs. I think somewhere along the line groundhogs figured out that even though mothers get presents on Mother’s Day and fathers get presents on Father’s Day, groundhogs don’t get anything on Groundhog Day. As far as they are concerned, except in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, and for a certain groundhog named Phil, it’s just another day.

The reason why today is so special is that it is Super Bowl Sunday! I confess, however, that I am a lot less interested in the game now that the New England Patriots were so unceremoniously eliminated by the Denver Broncos two weeks ago, and we will be watching Denver rather than the Patriots play Seattle.

Two weeks ago Jim Holmes gave me a newspaper clipping. This guy must spend a lot of time reading newspapers because he is always giving me interesting little newspaper clippings. But this is not the point. The point is that according to the Public Religion Research Institute, 26% of people (including one in three football fans) say they pray to God to help their favorite sports team. These people not only believe that praying for your favorite team can affect the outcome of the game, they actually ask God to intercede on their (and their team’s) behalf.

I don’t want to appear judgmental, but my basic problem with this understanding of prayer is that it’s stupid. If you think about it, it leaves us with some strange and unsettling feelings about God. Since the Broncos beat the Patriots two weeks ago, and assuming that there are roughly the same number of Christians in Colorado as Massachusetts (which I’m not sure is the case), does this mean that God likes the Broncos more than the Patriots, Denver more than
Foxborough, Colorado more than Massachusetts, or Peyton Manning more than Tom Brady? This would lead me to lose respect for God, which would not be a good thing.

Although I believe in the power of intercessory prayer, I do not believe it applies to sporting events. I don’t believe that God chooses sides. I think that the outcome of the game is attributable to other factors, like the talent or athleticism or desire or the coaching of the two teams. I would like to note however, that there are only two states in the country that have legalized the sale of marijuana for recreational purposes: Colorado and Washington. Do you really think it is a coincidence that of the thirty-two teams in the National Football League, the two teams that are appearing in today’s Super Bowl are from Colorado and Washington?

On most communion Sundays we set aside some time to talk to Jesus. We hold Jesus in our imagination, in our mind’s eye. We picture him sitting next to us, closer to us than we are to ourselves. Then we talk to Jesus honestly and openly about our life. We share our gratitude for our many blessings. We also share our struggles, the parts of us that are broken and in need of healing, the parts of us that are weak and in need of strengthening, the parts of us that are lost and confused and in need of guidance. Then we open ourselves to his guidance.

The theology that informs this type of prayer is the belief that Jesus is not only our Lord and Master but also our friend, and that we can talk with Jesus as we would with our very best friend. Not everyone holds this view or picture of Jesus. Some Christians feel uncomfortable talking to Jesus as a friend. They feel that it is more meaningful to worship Jesus than to talk to him. When we turn to scripture or to the theology that is articulated in our hymns, we find ample expression of both views. Perhaps it comes down to the matter of which understanding and which set of feelings is most meaningful to you, most helpful to you in your spiritual life.

This past week I discovered an illustration of this theological dichotomy as I was cleaning out my files. It was an article on how to prepare for the Second Coming that appeared in the supermarket tabloid “Weekly World News” several years ago. Actually there was a whole End Times Handbook included in this edition to prepare us for the Second Coming, along with the advice to save it as a handy reference in case we need it.
The article, which is entitled an “Expert’s Etiquette for the Second Coming of Christ”, was written by the Reverend Keith Pithe of Atlanta. It doesn’t say how Rev. Pithe came to be an expert on rules of etiquette for our eventual meeting with Christ, but if it is printed in the “Weekly World News” it must be true. Let me read you a few excerpts from this interesting and informative article.

“If you are lucky enough to meet Jesus in person, you want to make the best impression possible,” says Reverend Pithe. (I am going to have to think about that -- the notion that I should try to make a good impression on Jesus.) Reverend Pithe then goes on to answer some of the common questions Christians have asked him about Second Coming etiquette.

**Question 1: How do I address Jesus?**

Reverend Pithe suggests the titles “Master,” “My Lord,” or “Father” as the most appropriate forms of address.

**Question 2: May I touch him?**

Reverend Pithe says, “A simple handshake is acceptable, but don’t try to impress the Savior with how ‘manly’ your grip is. Squeezing Christ’s palms could irritate his crucifixion wounds.”

**Question 3: How should I show my reverence?**

Reverend Pithe tells us, “Bowing is fine; genuflecting is better. Prostrating yourself to kiss His feet is not advisable when there are others around who wish to adore the Messiah -- because unless you’re extremely fit, it takes too long to get up. Remember, hogging time with the Lord is not fair.” (This leads me to believe that Reverend Pithe is about my age.)

**Question 4: Should I ask Him for help?**

The answer is “Yes. Just try to be as concise as possible.”

**Question 5: May I complain?**

Reverend Pithe’s answer is, “You may have a beef about the way things are going in your life, and you may hold God to blame. But before you shoot off your mouth, remind yourself that
Judgment Day is due to arrive soon after the Second Coming, and you want to stay on His good side.” (This is an interesting notion -- that Jesus has a “good side.”)

Question 6: May I invite Him to dinner?

The answer is yes, “but consult a kosher cookbook when putting together the menu.” (This makes sense since Jesus was a Jew.)

Question 7: What if His table manners are odd?

Reverend Pithe reminds us that Jesus, who was raised in ancient Palestine, may feel uncomfortable using a table knife and fork. “If Jesus does not use these utensils correctly,” Reverend Pithe advises, “Don’t attempt to correct Him, just quietly show Him the correct way by example.” (I have to think about this one, the notion that I should show Jesus the correct way by example, i.e., that I should be a role model for Jesus.)

Question 8: Is it okay to make a joke?

The answer here is yes, “although it would be a good idea to keep your jokes clean.” Reverend Pithe goes on to say that “if Christ cracks a joke Himself, don’t feel compelled to laugh if you don’t get it. Jesus can spot a phony a mile away.”

So now you know how to behave when you meet Jesus face to face, either at the time of the Second Coming or when you die. I have to admit that some parts of the Handbook seem to be just common sense, like don’t tell dirty jokes. I don’t think I would feel inclined to try to impress Jesus with how manly my grip was, but just in case I did, the reminder about the crucifixion wounds was helpful. The advice that we should not correct Jesus sounds like good advice, though, as I said, the notion of me setting a good example for Jesus stretches my imagination just a little. I also think it was helpful to make the distinction between sharing our problems with Jesus and simply whining or complaining.

The part of the Handbook that I found especially interesting was the answer to Question #1 -- how to address Jesus if we should meet him. It struck me that the titles that Reverend Pithe recommends are rather formal. I’m no expert on Second Coming etiquette, but I have a hunch
that Jesus wouldn’t want us to use formal titles. I have a hunch that he would want us to call him by name and relate to him as a friend, especially if we are his disciples.

In the history of the Christian church, Jesus has been presented as an object of worship and veneration. As our Lord and Master, I certainly believe he is worthy of this veneration, but I have a problem with it. I don’t think Jesus sought this kind of veneration when he was here on earth, nor do I believe he wants it now. I don’t think Jesus wanted to be worshipped. I think Jesus wanted us to worship God. I don’t believe Jesus pointed to himself as the goal of our spiritual journey, but to the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, the realm of God that he wanted us to experience and to enter. Jesus came to show us the Way, and he wanted us to become not only his disciples but also, and more importantly, “disciples of the Way.”

In this morning’s scripture passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” He also says, “I do not call you servants any longer, . . . but I have called you friends.”

Jesus tells us he does not want us to be his servant but his friend. He wants us to become disciples of the Way. He wants us to walk with him and to talk with him. He would like the hymn we sang last week: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and the hymns we are singing this morning. I don’t think he wants the worship, the veneration, the kind of formality that creates distance. I think he wants the honesty and love that are essential parts of an intimate friendship.

In the quiet of our communion service this morning, just talk to Jesus. When you pray, don’t get caught up in the formalities and the fancy wording -- just talk to him. When you are going for a walk or riding in your car this coming week, just talk to him. Talk with him as you would to a very good friend. And then listen.

For what Reverend Pithe apparently doesn’t know is that we don’t have to wait for the Second Coming to meet Jesus.

A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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