

Friendship and Prayer - The Character of God,

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I have been re-reading Joseph Smith's *Lectures on Faith*. It is a very little book – a study guide – used by Joseph and his friends in the Kirtland School of the Prophets. It consists of only 6 short lectures. One, number 3, is devoted entirely to analyzing the *character* of God. Here are some excerpts:

12. From the foregoing testimonies we learn the following things respecting the character of God:

13. First, that he was God before the world was created, and the same God that he was after it was created.

14. Secondly, that he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in goodness, and that he was so from everlasting, and will be to everlasting.

15. Thirdly, that he changes not, neither is there variableness with him; but that he is the same from everlasting to everlasting, being the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever; and that his course is one eternal round, without variation.

16. Fourthly, that he is a God of truth and cannot lie.

17. Fifthly, that he is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted of him.

18. Sixthly, that he is love.

...

24. And lastly, but not less important to the exercise of faith in God, is the idea that he is love; for with all the other excellencies in his character, without this one to influence them, they could not have such powerful dominion over the minds of men; but when the idea is planted in the mind that he is love, who cannot see the just ground that men of every nation, kindred, and tongue, have to exercise faith in God so as to obtain eternal life? ¹

The School of the Prophets was organized according to a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph in December 1832, less than two years after the Church was organized. That revelation, Section 88, is remarkable for many reasons, not the least of which is the word “friends” found in these three verses which I lift from their original context and put together as one.

3 Wherefore, I now send upon you another Comforter, even upon you my friends, that it may abide in your hearts, even the Holy Spirit of promise; which other Comforter is the same that I promised unto my disciples, as is recorded in the testimony of John.

62 And again, verily I say unto you, my friends, I leave these sayings with you to ponder in your hearts, with this commandment which I give unto you, that ye shall call upon me while I am near –

117 Therefore, verily I say unto you, my friends, call your solemn assembly, as I have commanded you. (D&C 88: 3, 62, 117)

A short time after giving this revelation, the Saviour explained that his calling them “friends”

¹*Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985).

was founded upon a covenantal interrelationship between himself, them, and our Father in Heaven.

Verily, I say unto my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., or in other words, I will call you friends, for you are my friends, and ye shall have an inheritance with me – (D&C 93:45)

His explanation is very simple. It begins with “for” – “because” is the same idea: I call you friends because you are my friends” – a straightforward reminder of a friendship that extended into their past far beyond the reaches of their present memory; and because “ye shall have an inheritance with me” – a reminder of a covenant made a very long time ago, whose consequences reach forever into future eternities.

The friendship was, and still is, real, but it did not change their subordination to the Saviour. In that same revelation he said, “Now, I say unto you, my friends, let my servant Sidney Rigdon go on his journey, and make haste....” (D&C 93:51); and in the next section, “And again, verily I say unto you, my friends, a commandment I give unto you, that ye shall commence a work of laying out and preparing a beginning and foundation of the city of the stake of Zion” (D&C 94: 1) Real as that friendship was, it did not alter the fact that the Saviour was still very much in charge of the affairs of the Church² – but neither did the fact that the Saviour was in charge alter the tenderness of the friendship.

Verily I say unto you my friends, fear not, let your hearts be comforted; yea, rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks; (D&C 97: 1)

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you, my friends Sidney and Joseph, your families are well; they are in mine hands, and I will do with them as seemeth me good; for in me there is all power. (D&C 100: 1)

The reality of the Saviour’s love for the Prophet Joseph and Joseph’s love for the Saviour is something I have understood since I was a child, but their “friendship” is something I did not begin to understand until I became much older. As is so often so, I do not have the words to describe what I mean, so let me try to explain it by writing about something else altogether.

When I was a child, growing up on the farm, I was more closely associated with my parents and little sister than with anyone else in the whole world. I knew my parents as my providers, protectors, and teachers – people whom I could look up to and trust absolutely. But I knew nothing about their lives when they were away from home – except as I saw them associate with other people at church, or when we went shopping. As a little boy, I didn’t understand that they had lives before there was a “me”; and I didn’t know that they had friends beyond my association with them; and I didn’t know that they were mature people, because I didn’t know what a mature person was. I could not fathom the rest of the world they lived in – that it was real, and whole, and rather beautiful. When I was a teenager I still loved them very much, I had learned more about them as people, but I was in high school, had a job, read, studied, played with my friends; consequently much – actually most – of my life happened outside my parents’ company, and I

²Examples are: D&C 97: 1, 103: 1, 104: 1, 105: 26. In Joseph’s dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple, he calls attention to that friendship: D&C 109: 6.

suppose I knew even less about their private lives than I had known before. Like every other teenager, I thought of myself as a mature person, and of my world as reality – but it was so unlike the world they lived in, that it was impossible for me to know who, or what they really were. Now (2004) I have collected many years worth of experiences – I am old enough to retire – my Mom has been dead these past 20 years, and my Dad 15 years – and it has been during those years that I have come to know them better than I ever did before – I do not know details about what they are doing just now because they are off on a mission somewhere where I can't get to, and we haven't had much contact recently – but I know *them* better now than I did before. I understand how they thought, and why they sometimes acted the way they did. I know them because I now am beginning to know myself, and in that growing understanding of my Self, I catch my Self doing what they did, saying what they said, and responding the way they responded. In my maturity, I know them because I increasingly recognize my Self as being like them. I am now becoming qualified to be their friend, and can hardly wait to embrace them again – as a son – and also as a friend.

I think one's knowing God is probably much like that in the two most important ways.

First, it takes time – a maturation of thought and experience – during which time one must learn a great deal *about* God (just as I learned a great deal about my parents in the first 20 years of my life, even though I was not mature enough to really understand what I knew) – it takes time and experience for one to become well enough acquainted with the Spirit that one can come to know how to hear and trust the words of God.

Second, before one can discover who and what God is, one must first learn – in the environment of this world – who and what one's Self really is. One must know and honestly acknowledge one's Self before one can know or begin to understand one's God. During that maturation time, one must learn how to recognize and experience God's love in a variety of circumstances, and try to emulate what one understands Him to be. Then, after a while, one can begin to recognize in one's Self the attributes of patience, lovingkindness, longsuffering, and love, that remind one of the way God is.

All that sounds reasonable, and, I suppose, is fundamentally true. But, even so, there is a quality of friendship that is deeper than that sort of understanding. I cannot describe it either, so again, I must write about something else in order to explain what I otherwise could not say.

There are two phrases that Bible scholars often use, but that Latter-day Saints rarely do. Nevertheless they are handy because they say so clearly what they intend to say. One is “sacred space” and the other is “sacred time.” Sacred space is a place designated (either by men or by God) as being set apart from the rest of the world – a place where man can go to meet God – Eden, Sinai, Solomon's Temple, modern LDS temples – in fact, it is any place where God is, but where the “world” cannot come.

When prophets create sacred space, the first step is that God (through the prophet) dictates what its measurements should be. Thus, Jehovah gave Noah the measurements for the Ark; gave Moses the measurements for the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant; gave Joseph Smith the measurements for the Kirtland Temple – and when President Hinkley first received the revelation

about building many small temples, he sat in his car and wrote down the dimensions. The reason measurements are necessary is that they denote where the walls will be: and the space within the walls is sacred. Thus, identifying through measurement is the first step in designating sacred space.³

That, in brief, is essentially the way scholars describe “sacred space,” but experience and the scriptures teach us that it is an incomplete and therefore an inadequate description.

The Saviour made it clear that the geography of sacred space need not be static, by that I mean that it is not true that only certain clearly definable geographic locations can be regarded as sacred space. Jesus said to Peter and the rest of the Twelve,

18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:18-20)

So if we are defining sacred space as the place where God is, then, in the instances he describes, the sacred space is wherever the disciples happen to be when the Saviour is with them. Perhaps the best example of that in the scriptures is this one:

13-30 And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus . . . Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad? [They told him about the Saviour’s death, and he explained to them why the scriptures say that he must die.] And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: ... as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.

31 And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.

32 And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

33 And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them,

34 Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.

35 And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread.

36 And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. (Luke 24)

In this story, the sacred space moved down the road as the men walked; it tarried with them as

³Two other examples are Ezekiel, who carefully gives the measurements of the temple he saw in vision; and John, in the last chapters of Revelation, who gives the measurements of the city where celestial people will live.

they ate, then next became apparent at Jerusalem where the Saviour appeared to those assembled there.

Later – almost 2000 years later, in 1829, a full year before the Church was formally organized – the Saviour made the same promise to Joseph and Oliver.

32 Verily, verily, I say unto you, as I said unto my disciples, where two or three are gathered together in my name, as touching one thing, behold, there will I be in the midst of them – even so am I in the midst of you.

33 Fear not to do good, my sons, for whatsoever ye sow, that shall ye also reap; therefore, if ye sow good ye shall also reap good for your reward. (D&C 6: 32-33).

Mormons often read the scriptures the way other Christians do: that is, we completely ignore the historical and contextual setting of a statement; pull it out of its original context; and broaden its meaning so that it can also apply to ourselves. Nephi suggested this may be a perfectly legitimate way to read the scriptures,⁴ and in this case, that proves to be so.

We tend to read the scripture in Matthew as though it said: “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there the Holy Ghost will be in the midst of them – and that also is sacred space.” That concept is correct for two reasons: 1) because the Holy Ghost is a member of the Godhead. 2) because the people themselves are temples – they are not temples figuratively speaking, but in the most literal ways possible. People are temples, and there are at least five different ways that is actually true.

1. The first way is the most important because it is the most universal. It would take several pages to work out the rationale and carefully demonstrate that is so, so instead, let me just give you a quick outline and a few footnotes.

A. We are each innocent when we come into this world as little babies because we accepted the Saviour’s atonement in the spirit world before we came here.⁵

B. Acceptance of the atonement is always done formally by ordinances; that was as true in our pre-mortal life as it is in this one.⁶

C. In our pre-mortal existence, by at least one of those priesthood ordinances, we were measured, and thereby designated as sacred space. The word “span” means to measure with the hand. It is the distance is between the thumb and the little finger. In this world, for example, every time we give someone the gift of the

4“And I did read many things unto them which were written in the books of Moses; but that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning.” (1 Nephi 19:23)

5D&C 93: 38.

6 Joseph Fielding Smith used Ephesians 1:1-4 to show that there had received priesthood ordinances in the pre-mortal world. *The Way to Perfection* (Genealogical Society of Utah, 1949), p.50-1; and also his *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City, 1954,) 1: 66.

Holy Ghost, ordain one to the priesthood, give one a blessing, and “set one apart” to a calling, we place our hands on their head in a manner that measures them out as sacred space, and the words we speak identify and define them accordingly. As to such ordinances in our pre-mortal existence, there are two scriptures which mention that kind of measuring in the context of the pre-mortal spirit world.⁷ If the ordinance mentioned in those scriptures, or an ordinance similar to them, was given in conjunction with our accepting the Saviour’s atonement before we were born,⁸ then each of us came into this world having been measured and dedicated as a sacred temple.

D. Conclusion: assuming the truthfulness of those premises, we all came into this world as consecrated temples: Therefore the place where every little child is, is always sacred space.

2. A temple is where God dwells, the Holy Ghost is a member of the Godhead. Therefore, wherever he is, is a temple. Paul explained:

19 What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?
20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

3. The ultimate sealing power is charity,⁹ which is the pure love of Christ. That love cannot be where the Holy Spirit is not, therefore, wherever that quality of love is felt, the Spirit must be present, and that place is sacred space.¹⁰

4. Ordinances that measure one and define one as a temple, occur in this world, just as they did in the world before this one. All persons who, in this life, have had hands laid on

⁷They are Isaiah 40:12, and 1 Nephi 20:13. Isaiah 40 is the same chapter that tells of John the Baptist’s assignment, as is mentioned in every one of the gospels. 1 Nephi 20 is Isaiah 48 as it was recorded on the Brass Plates. There, the “heavens” are the same as the “stars” in Job 38: 2-7. In 1 Nephi 20:13 these “heavens” are measured out, called to a great meeting (the meeting is described more fully in the next few verses) where they make covenants. The verse does not mention the covenants, except to say that “they stand up together.” In the ancient world, one stood to make a covenant, as in 2 Kings 23: 1-3.

⁸The truth of that idea is strongly implied in the first chapter of Ephesians to which President Joseph Fielding Smith referred. That reference is given in the footnote 6.

⁹That is my opinion of course. I understand that all things must be done in order, and for an eternal sealing to be effectual, it must be authorized and ratified by the covenants and ordinances of the priesthood. However, I am also convinced that the actual sealing power – the power that effectually binds our souls together – is love.

¹⁰Human experience affirms that even though the Spirit of God must be present for one to feel the love that is called “charity,” one’s having formally received the gift of the Holy Ghost is not prerequisite for one to be able to feel that quality of love toward God or toward another human being.

their head, either in conjunction with an ordinance or a blessing (when that ordinance or blessing was performed by proper priesthood authority), have been measured and defined as a temple. Therefore all such persons who live worthy of those ordinances and blessings are, by definition, sacred space.¹¹

5. Sacred space is always separated from worldly space. It is identifiable as a geographic feature,¹² or identifiable because it is separated from the world by a wall, or by a veil. The wall is always tangible, but the veil need not be. A veil of light always separates that which is most sacred from that which is not. As covenant people, we wear two veils that separate us from the world – one is made of light,¹³ the other of cloth.¹⁴ Therefore, each of us is – or at least ought to be¹⁵ – readily identifiable as sacred space.

When all of the personal and covenantal criteria just mentioned combine together to make a person a living temple, then (because the Holy Ghost is that person's constant companion) wherever that person is, is sacred space.¹⁶

It, therefore, makes perfect sense, that when two such people are together, the feeling they share is similar to the way they might feel when they are in a building that is a temple. And that when two such persons meet for the first time, their spirits recognize each other through those same feelings.

“Sacred time,” is the time one experiences in sacred space. It is seeing the panorama of existence as a single event – the Council in Heaven, time on the earth, and our return to eternity – like Moses' seeing every person in an instant, or the brother of Jared's seeing the beginning and the end. The Lord defines “truth” as “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.” (D&C 93:24) That is, truth is knowledge of things as they are in the reality that is sacred time. I believe that experiencing sacred time is fundamental to human life. By that I mean that I understand that one's experiencing sacred time is so important to our ultimate salvation that our loving Heavenly Father does not limit it to only the prophets, or to one's LDS temple experience. It is available to everyone. Let me give you a simple, but very real, example. When a mother holds her baby in her arms, what she has in terms of this world's time is a little animal

¹¹Please remember that what I am writing here is only my opinion, but, from my point of view, at least, this statement is a very carefully considered opinion.

¹²That is, a mountain, a valley, a grove, or a spring of water that people believe to be a sacred place.

¹³For a discussion of the aura of light that surrounds each of us see: President David O. McKay, “Radiation of the Individual,” *The Instructor*, October, 1964, p. 373-374.

¹⁴When a woman wears a veil as a part of an ordinance, it is she who is within that veil. For the woman who keeps her covenants, the veil symbolizes the ambiance that ought to prevail between a righteous husband and his worthy wife.

¹⁵Experience and the scriptures teach us that the aura of light that defines one as sacred space can be enhanced by righteous living, or it can be obscured or obviated by avarice and unkindness.

¹⁶“The elements are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God, even temples; and whatsoever temple is defiled, God shall destroy that temple.” (D&C 93: 35)

that makes great noises and produces dirty diapers – her love acknowledges that, but it does not focus on that, because what she loves is more than just the reality she *holds* in profane time. Rather, it is the reality she *feels* in sacred time. She knows instinctively (even if she does not understand doctrinally) that when the baby came to her it came as something already sacred, she feels its human capacity to do good, and she senses its eternal nature. The mother understands and loves the child in sacred time.

Another, no less ordinary example, is when two people meet for the first time, and know instantly that they are friends – not that they will become friends, but that they *are* friends. I am convinced that kind of instant recognition can only happen in sacred space and sacred time.

Now, with all that as a background, let me return to the idea of friendship.

As I consider my own family and my other dear friends, I realize that I loved them long before I knew very many details about their lives. Over the years, it has been my great blessing to have many friends who were then college students. (Many of you are, or were once, in that category.) By loving you, I have learned, through rich and repeated experience, that I can love someone very much – very soon after we meet – not because of what I know, or have known, about the particulars of your earthly lives – but because I can *feel* the power of your spiritual/intellectual integrity. I knew and recognized you in sacred time – and one’s experiencing the reality of another person in sacred time, is, I believe, the equivalent of experiencing love. Such almost instant friendships become permanent as each person comes to appreciate, in the other, reciprocal and repeated evidences of confidence, trust, and the kind of vulnerability that comes from one’s willingness to see oneself – and to be seen by another – as one really is. I have come to believe that true family love, true friendship – the reality that is charity – can only be experienced – can only exist – in sacred time.

So another, probably much more realistic, way of appraising my relationship with my parents, is to observe that I loved them with all my heart, long, long before I understood the particulars of their lives as mature people. The maturation of my understanding, as I described it to you earlier, was the capstone – not the origin – of that love.

If one’s friendship with another human is based on those principles, then it seems to me that one’s friendship with God ought to be the same sort of thing. That is, it requires a mutual appreciation of spiritual and intellectual integrity, along with reciprocal and repeated evidences of confidence, trust, and the kind of vulnerability that comes from one’s willingness to see one’s Self – and to be seen by Another – as one really is.¹⁷

¹⁷The question of who one really is can easily become entangled in a maze of cultural and sub-cultural expectations. People tend to define themselves and others in terms of the tentative and fleeting things of this world, such as religious and political tradition, family and social ties, wealth or poverty, a greater or lesser education, or simply by how many expensive toys one has. Those things mask the reality of an individual, and if one takes them too seriously, they hide one’s reality even from one’s Self. I cannot find a simple definition of what one’s reality ought to be anywhere in the scriptures, yet there is one answer that is overriding, though implicit, and that can be found almost everywhere. It is this: This world is designed to define an

I suppose that my earthly relationship with my God has a history that is very much like the history of my relationship with my parents – founded on two concurrent principles, and two different kinds of interactions – which ultimately mature together to become one. And I suppose, as is always true with friendships, that I must become fully honest about knowing my Self before I can expect to know Him as He really is – I suppose that is the same as saying that I must be willing to be His friend, before I can become capable of letting Him be mine. And I am convinced that one’s friendship with God can only be fully realized when one understands one’s Self and one’s God in sacred time.

If that is so, then I suppose it is appropriate to ask, “How ought one to converse with God?” He tells us that we should pray “always,” but I think he does not mean to imply that we should do nothing in our lives except “say prayers.”

It seems to me that prayer is like walking in the mountain with a friend. There are times you walk with the other in silence, then your eyes catch something glowing in the sunlight, and you stop – alone – and ponder the perfect beauty of a pale blue columbine. At that moment, that columbine is the only reality in your awareness. But the presence of your friend, without your noticing, makes the columbine more real. There are other times when you see a sunrise so expansive and glorious that it must be shared with your friend, or it can only be half appreciated – because unless your friend can see it too, it can express only half of its sublime majesty. Sometimes you talk together – your friend and you – but only briefly – because a smile can say so much more than words – yet other times words shared are so very, very necessary. And they flow out and meet together like the confluence of two great rivers – and their ideas embrace in a world as big as the open sea. Sometimes you walk together quietly and say nothing, and the unspoken words are more profound than speech. There is no aloneness in the quiet, just as there was no aloneness when all your conscious world was only the beauty of a single pale blue columbine. Friendship is like that. So is prayer.

Prayer is this: Forever walking in a mountain with a friend. Stopping sometimes alone – sometimes together – to admire the columbine. Sometimes being so caught up in the urgent majesty of the mountain that one doesn't remember his friend is even there, but that momentarily not remembering does not create an empty place within one’s soul – because one knows deeper than consciousness that he *IS* – and that he is *here*. Sometimes prayer shuts out the beauty of the mountain while you talk together – listening and talking – and talking and listening. Sometimes you don’t really want to listen, you just need to talk and talk and know that you are being

individual in terms of the quality of his love, as he personifies that love while he is here – in this world – outside the presence of God. If the love he expressed there – before he came here – was simply a disguise because he knew which side his bread was buttered on, that will show in his relationships with people here. But if he truly loved God and his children, that will also show. For the latter person, I suppose, reality is when one becomes again – in this world – the same kind of person one was while he was in the pre-mortal presence of God. And I suppose the final test will be a variation of the simple question: “For what things, or for what advantages to yourself, were you willing to trade the security and happiness of other people?” And if one has any affirmative answer at all to that question, one is in very bad trouble!

listened to. Other times your only desire is to fill your mind by listening to what He has to say, because listening to His voice is the epitome of peace. Sometimes the quietude of prayer is filling ones' whole soul with just knowing that you are together.

Our world tends to crowd out one's consciousness of that quality of constant prayer, and I suppose, for as long as we live here, that will ever be so. But when the time comes – when the Spirit whispers, “Arise, and get thee into the mountain” – the world will fade below the horizon of one's consciousness, and one can walk in peace, in sacred space and sacred time, with one's most beloved Friend.