Amos 5:18-24 Religion – or Relationship?

How do you get along with your neighbors? Are they friendly—or are they friends? Does it matter?

Steve and I bought our house in part because the neighbors promised us an invitation to their monthly euchre group. Their friendliness sold us the house. What we didn't know was that those five couples would become close friends—people we vacation with, celebrate with, and share good times and bad.

There's a difference, isn't there? Being friendly can be as simple as a wave or a word about the weather. Friendship asks more of us: time, commitment, and a willingness to show up when life is tough or the timing is inconvenient. The effort is greater, but so are the rewards.

I see that kind of friendship at St. John—in the sharing of the peace, the lunches, conversations, the laughter, and the genuine care you have for one another. You go beyond saying hello. You live in relationship.

Just as there is a difference between friendliness and friendship, there is a difference between going through religious motions and living in relationship with God.

The Israelites in today's reading from Amos are performing all the religious activities correctly. Sacrifices, festivals, offerings – all according to the rule. They look forward to Judgement Day and the praise they are sure to receive. Amos warns them that God does not want correct worship practices alone. That is not what makes people righteous. Their actions are correct, but their hearts are far from what God wants. And so, on the day of judgement, they will find fear and darkness instead of praise and reward. God wants relationship, not religion – relationship with him that is revealed in their relationships with each other. They have fallen short, chosen religion, not relationship.

Thank goodness we're better than those Israelites. Or are we? How can we grow in relationship with Christ?

Perhaps we can begin with something as simple as saying grace. When I was a child, our usual prayer began "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest." Some nights I hurried through it because it was the last barrier between me and dinner. Holidays, however, we had special prayers, usually said by my grandfather. One Thanksgiving, his prayer was especially long. Afterward, my father quietly suggested that next year he try, "Good bread, good meat, good God, let's eat." Everyone laughed—except Mom. Her horrified "NED!" still echoes in my memory.

Dad was being funny. But don't we sometimes rush through prayer or worship so we can get back to our "real lives"? What if, instead, when we said grace, we meant that invitation: Come, Lord Jesus. Be our guest. What if he accepted our invitation?

When Dad's boss came for dinner, we children had to be on our best behavior, and make polite conversation. It was awkward and embarrassing. We could hardly wait to escape the table. I hope I wouldn't feel that way with Jesus! But imagine him joining us night after night. With each meal and conversation, the awkwardness would give way to friendship. We would be living life as his original disciples did, rich in a growing relationship.

We may not see Christ at our dinner tables, but the invitation is real. There are many ways Christ extends an invitation to deeper relationship with him. In Holy Communion, in prayer, in Scripture, and in worship, we are invited into a deeper relationship with the God we love. We are invited to go beyond religion, to be in a relationship with God that promises us abundant life, life full of love, and service to God's world.

Come, Lord Jesus – be our guest. Help us to live more closely with you, growing in love toward our neighbors, treating them with justice and care. Amen.