

MAY 17, 2009
EASTER 6
“FRIENDS”

Let us pray: “What a friend” we have in Jesus, O loving God, your Son you sent not only to become one with us in our humanity but whom you sent to love and “befriend” us—showing us what it is to be truly human. For this we give you thanks, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

From “Cheers” to “Seinfeld” to the appropriately and simply named “Friends,” television sitcoms often rely on the tried and true format of providing us viewers vicarious access to a tightly bound network of friends to which we become attached. The fact that they are composed of a highly dysfunctional set of individuals makes them only more appealing (and funny—take Seinfeld, for example, which raised the genre to a comedic art form in this viewer’s opinion). While fictional, they provide the viewer with the satisfaction of identifying

from a distance with an idyllic group of acquaintances in which “everybody knows your name.” I’ve got the strong feeling that none of the current crop of sit-coms (from “The Office” to “30 Rock” or even to “Boston Legal”) quite rises to the same level.

It’s uncommon to think about friendship in terms of our faith, isn’t it? We’re more familiar with “love” talk as we encounter it in today’s readings from the First Letter of John and the Gospel according to St. John, where by my count the word “love”—*agape* in Greek—is mentioned no less than **14** times! You’ve probably heard once or twice before that in Greek there are three different words that are all translated by the English word “love.”

The first, “*eros*,” the root from which our English adjective “erotic” derives, is a word that can mean passionate love, the kind of love that desires the other for itself and can lead to a kind of out-of-control or intoxicated love—love bordering on lust

which our English word “eroticism” connotes. This very common, every-day word in ancient Greek, very interestingly never appears in the New Testament, although it is used in all kinds of ways, many of them positive, in ancient Greek literature and philosophy.

A second Greek word for love is “*philia*,” a word that can be translated as friendship or devotion or even affection. We easily think of words like “philosophy” meaning love of wisdom, or “philanthropy,” which literally means love of humanity or place-names like “Philadelphia” which means literally, “brotherly love.” But “*philos*” can also mean something as simple as a kiss, a physical sign of affection.

But it’s the third Greek word, “*agape*,” that is the word most frequently translated as love in the New Testament. “*Agape*” is love in the strong, and almost untranslatable sense of Christian love—love in its fullest and richest sense as we encounter it in Jesus telling us to “love your enemies” as in St.

Matthew's Gospel in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; or as in today's reading in John's Gospel, where Jesus tells his disciples of God's love for him and for them, and then commands them to bear the fruit of love in their lives. "God is love," we heard from I John in last week's reading, and today we hear Jesus saying, "No one has greater *agape* than this, to lay down one's life for one's *philoï*." And Jesus goes on to describe his disciples as "*philoï*" twice more in the following verses: "You are my *friends* if you do what I command you. I do not call you *servants* (the word literally means "slaves") any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you *friends*, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you."

I have a friend, a former colleague in campus ministry in Ann Arbor—a Pastor of the Christian Reformed Church named Don Postema—whom I remember first helping

me to see the depths of what Jesus was trying to get us all to see by using three times this word “*philoī*” or friends, in the midst of his more characteristic *agape* talk. It’s a good point to remember in this “memory month” stretching between Mothers’ Day and Fathers’ Day. I remember how Don insisted that too many of us Christians suffer from a kind of “infantile paralysis” of the faith that fixates us into viewing ourselves as perpetual children in our relationship to our fathering and mothering God.

What Don argued on the basis of this text from John’s Gospel was that by elevating us from the status of children (admittedly an image Jesus did often use) or slaves or servants as in today’s text, to the status of friends, Jesus was in effect welcoming us into a mature faith relationship with God, akin to that of an **adult child**’s relationship to one’s parent(s). At its best this is a relationship no longer of mere dependency, inferiority, or

childishness in either its passively obedient nor reactionary, rebellious modes, But instead a mature relationship with one's parents is one in which the parent is still parent but their love for the child is expansive and liberating rather than merely protective and directive, as may once have been appropriate and necessary. I've recently been reading Philip Roth's early book from the '60's Portnoy's Complaint in which the protagonist in his novel suffers no end of problems because of his parents continuing to treat him like a child well beyond his "childhood" years—and he, of course, responds, by not being able to deal with his parents in other than childish ways as he grows older.

Human metaphors for God—and our relationship to God—of course necessarily fail to convey the full richness of God's love for us and ours for God. Certainly fathering and mothering images, while among the richest we have in scripture are nonetheless far from perfect. But the too often neglected

image of “friend,” and particularly the mature friendship between a parent and an adult child, is one that more adequately comprehends and even expands our appreciation for our human experience of faith as well as God’s expectations of us as mature children loved by and loving of our heavenly Parent/God.

Is it too much of a stretch to think that the church itself as Jesus’ continuing band of disciples — whom he himself, remember, called “friends” — might profit from adding this metaphor of friendship to our own sense of what the church essentially is called to be in our world? At the very least it provides an alternative to the too often cloying metaphors of church as “family” or as some church consultants enamored of pop psychology have come to think of it in terms of “family systems theory.” In terms of the church’s “dysfunctionality” like some families there may be some similarity but I think “friends” is a much richer term than “family.”

Remember how in the third chapter of Mark's Gospel it is Jesus' own family that tried to interrupt his ministry and "restrain" him for they'd heard that people were saying about him "*He has gone out of his mind.*" When told that his mother and brothers were outside asking for him we need to remember Jesus' stern words of rebuke to his family which were at the same time words of inclusion of his followers: "Here are my mother and my brothers!" he said "*looking at those who were sat around listening to his teaching.*" "*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother,*" he concluded, which we can't help but hear as a thunderbolt from Jesus on all who would make the conventional family unit—whatever its form—into an idol—as do, might I add, so-called Christian groups like "Focus on the Family." I'll never forget that Anita Bryant's first anti-gay crusade in California back more than thirty years ago was called "Save the Family."

An old friend and fellow seminary classmate, a long-time Presbyterian pastor in Virginia, visited us here in LA a few years ago in the midst of his sabbatical in which he was conducting a study of friendship including a survey of his fellow alums from divinity school regarding the impact of friendships on their ministry. Particularly striking among his findings that he sent out to us was the strong yearning on the part of his colleagues in ministry for friendship and yet a strong sense of their being underachievers in establishing and enjoying a wide and deep network of friends. Some of this pastors frequently pass off as the problematic character of making personal friends among congregational members, which can lead to jealousy or special treatment—or at least the perception of a kind of friendship bias on the part of parishioners. More likely I think, on the basis of my own experience in making friends and my own experience of other clergy, is that pastors are simply too into

themselves and their own need for privacy—and often have a misplaced sense of being overworked and underappreciated compared to other folks, which I think is more a sign of low self-esteem than anything else as the status of clergy has slipped in our society.

My friend's strong conclusion was that learning to nurture friendship is a practice that pastors need to master for their own professional and personal well-being. And more than that I'd say as a way of setting a well-rounded example to their own parishioners. Ruth and I certainly count our friends among the most valuable gifts in our lives—people we've met and befriended everywhere we've lived, as you've had some opportunity to see as our nearly continuous stream of house guests has attested over these years among you. I think I'd have to admit that one of the major attractions of retirement from full-time pastoral ministry is the larger opportunity it will afford us to visit and be visited by

friends near and far, old and new, as well as for us to make yet more new friends in the place we've chosen to live, which we think will be a grand place to host our friends.

A pastor by the name of Gregory Boyd writes in a recent edition of the Christian Century magazine: “Close-knit, loving, mutually submitted and mutually accountable relationships — these constitute the primary context in which God transforms us and uses us to transform the world.”

A dozen years ago while a delegate to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Hong Kong I was introduced to a beautiful Chinese hymn set to an ancient Chinese lute melody. It's a hymn I plan to use perhaps on our last Sunday together in August. It's chiefly a farewell hymn but it's also a hymn about friendship. Other than the oldie but goodie “What A Friend We Have in Jesus” can you think of any other hymns that even use the word “friend” much less focus on “friendship?” This hymn begins with these

words, “*Friends of years with just one heart, must now say farewell and part, unsure when again we meet, these last hours are yet more sweet.*” And then come these lovely words of benediction as the refrain: “*May our loving God guide thee, guard thee, over hill and deep sea; one we’ll always be; one in faith, one in hope, one in fellowship of love.*”

Good friendships, my friends in Christ.
Amen.

The peace that passes understanding
keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.