

Sermon: “Friends We Did Not Earn: The Graceful Bond”
Rev. Martha Hodges Feb. 28, 2010

Generous friends, crotchety friends, funny friends, nourishing friends... we need them all; we love them all. Max Coots’s poemⁱ is amusing and true, but it isn’t the whole story, of course. Because no friend fits that neatly into a single category. I may bring out the curmudgeon in the same person who is your comforter. You may have the most playful of friendships with the same person who is the counselor, the rock and refuge of someone else. This is the nature of friendships. They call out different aspects of our personalities, our life experiences, our needs and desires.

So, your cauliflower may be my parsnip. And not only that. Friendships change over time and they may depend on context. The friend who is your poker buddy today may be the one who sees you through your chemotherapy tomorrow; the friend who is needy today may be the one to come through for you when it is your turn to be in need.

Some friendships depend on such fixed roles that there is no such flexibility. One person is the wise one, the flaky one, the competent one, or the entertaining one, and the mutual understanding isn’t deep enough to allow these assignments to change over time or under new circumstances. These friendships may be satisfying for a time but they grow stale or fall apart when the context changes. The friend from work or school may fade from your life when you no longer have the office or the classroom in common. Friendships wax and wane and have their seasons, and that’s all right. If we’re lucky, we have at least one friend who is truly portable. Someone with whom the bond is deep enough, someone with whom we discover our truest and best selves, and that friend will be a friend for life.

But most deep friendships take work, especially when physical proximity is absent. Then we need to make a little effort to feed the friendship, to keep it alive with intention and care. In fact, even those friends whom we see often because they are neighbors or colleagues need this kind of nurture if we want the friendship to grow. They require listening, and attention, and tolerance, and forgiveness.

The reading we shared earlierⁱⁱ had it partly right – friends can’t be earned, but friendships can, at least in part. There must be something there, some spark of attraction, that is mysterious and has nothing to do with intention. No amount of effort will create a friendship if there is not that mutual recognition – that moment in an acquaintanceship when you both truly see each other for the first time. When you look into the other’s eyes and see there, not only the reflection of yourself, but a glimpse of the other person’s world, her reality, her soul, if you will. And that is where grace enters into the picture.

It is grace – that is, a gift we did not earn – that we are so made that we seek and sometimes find this kind of communion. This mysterious connection that allows us to truly see another, and, seeing him, to accept him and to love him for who he is.

We don't necessarily approve of everything our friends do. They may annoy us, a little or a lot. They may disappoint us or get on our nerves from time to time or even make us really angry. They are imperfect, like us. We may become impatient with their imperfection, or with the imperfection in ourselves that they bring to our attention, on purpose or otherwise. We may not like everything about them or everything about ourselves that we see when we are unguarded enough around them to be ourselves. But there is something stronger between us than annoyance or disappointment. And this thing is mutual respect and enjoyment and appreciation and loyalty – it is love.

Friendships are greater than the sum of their parts, greater than the sum of the individuals involved. When two people are friends, they create something between them that neither of them plans, designs or controls; they create something new. And this new something changes both of them. The friendship, in turn, creates new and richer, more complex versions of the individuals within it. Friendship is a creative enterprise, in the sense that, together, we create a unique bond, a set of patterns and a history, a shared story. And it is a creative enterprise in the sense that it changes each of the participants forever.

I think of the friends I have had over the years. I think of one in particular, a friend who has seen me through hard times. When I've been ill, or without a place to stay, she has stood by me and opened her home to me. I've eaten many meals at her kitchen table and slept many nights on her living room couch. I know that I owe her a great deal. I would not hesitate to help her if she needed money or someone to take care of her child. And yet, something terrible happened to that friendship. It was broken and cannot be repaired, because the best of friends may also hurt us the most deeply. Friends can betray us and wound us, and, while we may forgive them, we can no longer quite trust them. Sometimes a friendship just costs us too much. It costs too much if it demands that we pay in self-respect. Sometimes, we just have to let that friend go, sadly and painfully, in order to be the person we want to be or must be.

Friendship helps us to determine what is tolerable and what is not. What is essential and what is optional. What is the bread of life and what is junk food – delicious and fun, but, in the end, not at all good for you.

I think of other friends that taught me the joys of community, of belonging. And of others who taught me to just relax and enjoy the moment, to play without always seeking a deeper meaning; friends I didn't need to rescue or be rescued by; friends to have fun with. I think of friends so unlike me that they were a constant wonder to me. Friends who've made me laugh till I cry; friends who have disappeared from my life but not from my heart.

And I think of friends that I have failed. Friends I have neglected or disappointed. And I resolve to try to make amends. For this is another of the gifts of friendship. It teaches us about our own shortcomings and gives us the challenge and the opportunity to be better.

Friendship can be hard and sometimes painful. But it is so much more. It is laughter and new ideas, trust rewarded, discoveries shared, moments of sheer delight and joy, and moments of deep contentment. It is being surprised by someone we thought held no more surprises for us and it is the reassurance of familiarity. It is knowing that we are accepted, and, more than that, acceptable, and even lovable, in all our peculiarity and neurotic imperfection. It is about rejoicing in the richness of the human spirit, its capacity to amaze us, again and again. And it is about being freed from the little prison of our own self-consciousness, our own self-obsession, and entering into another person's world. It's about learning and changing and growing in wisdom and joy and understanding.

So if it's so good for us, and so rewarding, so essential to our becoming ourselves, why is it so hard? It may help to look at the way children make friends. Children – very young ones, at least – strike up friendships without agonizing over them, seemingly without effort. It's as simple as saying, "Do you want to play?" Go to any park or public pool and watch them. They begin by playing alone, side by side. They inch closer. They seem to notice each other for the first time. Then comes the invitation, shy or demanding. "Want to play? Here, you be the baby, you be the catcher, you be 'It.'" Here's the set-up and here's your role. No questions about who you are, where you live, who your parents are or what they do for a living.

Children, unlike adults, have a very straightforward agenda – to have fun. Adults approach each other with caution. Will this person make me look good? Are they like me? Are they suitable? Will they let me teach them, convert them, fix them, help them, save them, change them, use them?

Children say what they mean and don't care about your background or your potential. Children do things, while grown-ups stand around and talk. Children immediately have something in common, something to offer, a place in the game. We adults have a harder time, especially those of us who are introverts by nature.

Thank god for the extraverts, we introverts say. They help us get through those first awkward minutes, or days, or weeks. They don't stand around wondering what to say next. They do all the work, carry the melody and let us introverts sing backup. Being an introvert can be exhausting. Especially during coffee hour. We come into our own once the small talk is over. Children don't do small talk.

We grown-ups aren't so fortunate. For us the game **is** the conversation. Unless we meet during some shared activity, like volunteering. At church, for instance. (Yes, sthis is a plug for volunteering at church.) Or a structured setting where the agenda is solely to learn from and about each other, a setting like a chalice circle. (Yes, this is a plug to join our chalice circle. Introverts and extraverts alike are welcome and wanted.)

Being welcome and wanted and letting others know they are welcome and wanted. Welcome for who they are; wanted for who **you** are, with no other agenda. Perhaps that is the true essence of friendship. Friendship in the sense of oneness with all people, not just with those who occupy major roles in our lives.

That kind of welcome is a deeply spiritual practice. It recognizes our common humanity, and that is sufficient reason to accord the other the respect, the dignity, the honesty, kindness and authentic interest that are the basis of friendship as well as civil behavior. If we could treat one another, friend and stranger alike, with respect, dignity, honesty, kindness and interest, the world would be a very different place, a peaceful and safe place. As it is, we can perform this small but essential office one person at a time. We can say, in word and deed, you are welcome here. You are wanted here. And in so doing, we save the world one person at a time, and save ourselves in the process.

Within us, within everything, electromagnetic forces create the bonds that allow the existence of molecules. These particles of matter are attracted to one another and this attraction, these bonds, are the scientific miracle that makes all life possible. Around us, the earth, and above us, the planets, move in their accustomed ways, each held in relationship to the whole by invisible forces of attraction that keep us from flying off into the abyss. From the microscopic to the cosmic, we are held together by these physical laws of attraction. And in between, we human beings wander, reel and collide and, sometimes, drawn by invisible and mysterious attraction, come together in bonds of love and friendship – connections that keep us from the abyss, that make our lives possible.

Break not the circle of enabling love, of creative love, the circle of friendship. May it grow wider still, until it included, embraces all the living. May we all – may all human beings and all living things – be welcome and wanted, in the full understanding that this world, this universe, is an ongoing creation, a creation in process, and that they and only they can make whole.

Amen.

ⁱ Coots, Max. “Let Us Give Thanks” <http://iminister.blogspot.com/2009/03/giving-thanks-for-max-coots.html>

ⁱⁱ Fewkes, Richard M. “We Lift Up Our Hearts in Thanks” No. 515 in *Singing the Living Tradition*