

“Christian Friendship”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
May 3, 2009 - the Fourth Sunday of Easter
and Based on 1 John 3:16-24
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

Don Hanna stopped by this past week. Don was our seminary intern a while ago, and after that, our Christian Ed. person as well. He and his family are now in Red Wing. He’s serving a church there; he’s their Christian Ed. person. During the time he was with us, he became a colleague and a friend to me, someone with whom I could easily talk about things that mattered. And sure enough, while his family was out and about in Uptown—I think Brenda, his wife, and Kira, his daughter, were getting their hair cut (haircuts in Red Wing just aren’t the same)—while all that was happening, Don and I slipped in to our old talk, talk about churches, talk about faith, talk about God. He’s got his hands full. A surprising number of his kids do not know a thing about Christianity. It’s something totally new. They’ve never heard of Jesus. They’ve barely heard of God—and that, not in the most flattering way. And the Bible is a foreign country. The Bible *is* a foreign country, which is to say, it belongs to another world view, one very different from our mental landscape. But in Don’s case, it was even stranger. His kids, some of them, at any rate, had never heard of the God who made heaven and earth and who judges us if we do not keep his commandments. Imagine teaching Sunday school in that setting.

All the more difficult, then, it occurred to me later on when working on this sermon, should someone have to introduce the faith with 1 John 3:16 as their lead-in text, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Imagine laying *that* on someone who knows absolutely nothing about the faith but is curious to see what it might entail. “Thanks, but no thanks,” I can hear them saying. And that would be the polite version.

Christians, of course, know right away what John is talking about. Jesus did indeed lay down his life for us. He willingly bore the punishment that should have come to us. We’re the sinners, after all; he was innocent! And because of his obedience, we go Scot free.

(Isn’t that a great phrase: “Scot free.” Mine is spelled with two t’s, but no matter. When you’re off the hook, you’re Scot free. You walk away without having to pay a dime.)

But Christians understanding this business of laying down one’s life for others—that’s what I was talking about. We do understand, don’t we? “Understand, yes,” I can hear people thinking, but I doubt that makes it any the more inviting. Let’s be honest. Is there anyone here who would willingly lay down his / her life for every other person in this room?

Oooh, that's a tough one. I'm getting kind of squirmy myself. I might lay down my life for *some* of you, perhaps Thursday of this coming week. It's not so busy on Thursdays. No, wait! I can't do it then. I've got an appointment. Could you come back next week?

Make that next decade.

I daresay if we were honest, this would not be a great text for us, either.

And yet I also daresay we just might do it for our friends.

Our friends: our friends are as close to us as our own flesh. In some ways, they're even closer. Our flesh has this habit of dragging us down. Our friends pick us up. They lift our spirits. Their conversation quickens our thoughts. We are happy to see them when we meet, and sad when they have to go. We could very well lay down our life for our friends.

We're assuming, of course, that this wouldn't happen often. Well..., I suppose it *wouldn't* happen often. Once would be enough, I guess. Still, it wouldn't happen *idly*. Our friends would be in danger. And because they matter greatly to us, we would risk our lives to save them.

Something of this same thinking should be applied, it seems to me, to the difficult text before us, 1 John 3:16. Friendship is the right setting for understanding what laying down one's life is all about. It is not heroics, in other words, that we are being called to, but friendships. "I do not call you servants any longer," Jesus said in the gospel of John, "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," John 15:15.

So, where does that leave us?

The first letter of John points the way: being a friend involves loving one another, not in words or speech, but in truth and action. Friends, true friends, speak not only about the things they have in common, their mutual likes and dislikes, but the things that in any other relationship would separate them. I have in mind the ability of friends to encourage, to advise, and to criticize each other, if done in love and for the sake of the other's good. "Friends don't let friends drive drunk," the ad campaign says, or drive SUVs, as another campaign has it, or join MySpace, or twitter when angry—choose your critical judgments. But the principle is the same. We can hear the judgments our friends make about us because we know they have our best interests at heart. They are our friends.

There is nothing especially Christian in all of this. Indeed, the first Christians simply took over what the Greeks and the Romans had written on the subject because there was so much of it around. Friendship was big in the ancient world. Aristotle wrote about it, so did Plato, so did Cicero. They distinguished between friendships based on pleasure ("We love to play bridge!"), friendships based on usefulness ("Whenever I need a hand, I know I can call on...X!"), and friendships based on virtue, on striving for a shared understanding of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

It was this last kind of friendship, the one based on virtue, that proved most hospitable to the new religion called Christianity. Christians knew what the good, the

true, and the beautiful was. It was God—God revealed in their Lord, Jesus Christ. Anyone who strove after this good was, by definition, their friend. And the same is true for us today. They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, but we will know we're Christians by our shared understanding that it is the kingdom of God we are seeking above all else.

Finding a friend who strives at the same rate you are striving is the trick. The two of you must have the same conception of the good in mind, and you must be seeking it with the same degree of intensity. Now, the thing which can make that happen, and just might be the one contribution which is especially Christian, is humility. If the two of you who come together are quick to see the log in your own eye before you see the speck in your friend's eye, then you have a good chance of becoming lasting Christian friends.

Taking note of logs before specks was important in Jesus' mind. Humility made it happen. The Church Father, John Cassian, who wrote at the beginning of the 5th century, said that there were six things to keep in mind when thinking about being a good friend. Reject all the things of this world and give priority to our love for our friend was number one. Restrain our own wills, was number two. Neither friend should think that he / she knows better than the other. Become convinced that nothing, not even the things that seem necessary and useful, are as valuable as love and peace—that was number three. Number four was not to allow oneself to become angry. Anger and the inability to give up our own wishes was considered especially destructive. Number five was try to get rid of any resentments we may feel towards our friends; harbor nothing that would eat away at this great gift. Number six was to live each day as if it were our last. There is nothing like a view of eternity to put our transitory feelings and minor irritations in perspective. (From Cassian's *The Conferences*.)

Humility is the foundation of all of these admonitions. Cassian wrote about the humility that allows us to rest content with our finitude, the humility that willingly limits the scope of our judgments—love and peace come first—and the humility that puts people before things. We need friends more than we need things, he said, and the friend we need first and foremost of all is God.

Is it really possible to have God as a friend? I know we sing, "What a friend we have in Jesus," but God?

The letter of James knows of one example in which a human was a friend of God: "'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' and he was called the friend of God," James 2:23. The illustration on the cover of your bulletin—a painting showing Christ putting his arm around St. Menas, Christ's friend—is another example. But the example that is best of all, and the one that I am sure James and St. Menas would defer to come what may, is found in Philippians 2:1-8. What's more, it has the added benefit of linking friendship, humility and our original concern, laying down one's life. It is this text with which I wish to close:

2:1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Amen.

I am indebted to the article “Moving Beyond Friendly to Friendship,” by Carolinne White, copyright 2008, by the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, for many insights expressed in this sermon.

See <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/61122.pdf>