



Holy Friendships and Christ-Shaped Faithfulness

A child of the city, our young daughter was astonished by her first visit to a friend's dairy farm. She silently surveyed the sheep grazing in a distant field and moved cautiously about the pasture avoiding wet noses, swinging tails, and worse. Finally, she turned to her young host and asked, "Where are all your friends?"

Clergy often wander cautiously among urban pastures and rural flocks asking themselves the same question. *Where are my friends?* How we answer that question often reflects the shape of our relationships with God and each other.

Friendless Shepherds?

If you want to enliven even the dullest conversation among clergy, talk about friendship. Listen to the laughter and affection that surge through stories of friends who encourage a vocation,

remain steadfast in tragedy, or temper the foolishness we sometimes find seductively flattering. Tales of friendship are among our most eloquent testimonies.

But these stories can also expose the raw loneliness of a friendless ministry. Pastors and their spouses are reported to be lonelier and experience greater difficulty in their marriage than nonclergy husbands and wives. In one survey, 70 percent of clergy said they have no close friends. Loneliness and isolation is the single greatest predictor of job dissatisfaction among clergy.

Friendships—especially among clergy and congregations—take time to cultivate and often are very fragile in their development. Like a healthy church dinner that involves more than food, holy friendships require more than people who are potential friends. These friendships have a distinctive character.

Friends with God

Holy friendship begins with the affirmation of God as friend, a claim that is neither new nor uncomplicated. The Hebrew Scriptures identify Yahweh as initiating this relationship when speaking to Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11). Jehoshaphat appeals to Yahweh in the name of "your friend Abraham" (2 Chronicles 20:7) and Isaiah records Yahweh as claiming that friendship in the presence of Israel (Isaiah 41:8). Wisdom theology puts that relationship within reach of others as "wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God and prophets" (Wisdom 7:27).

In the life of Jesus, God repeatedly makes friends of disciples, strangers, and even enemies. As Jesus says farewell to his disciples in John's gospel, he refers to them as his chosen friends and extends the boundaries of that friendship all the

way to the cross (John 15:14-16). Jesus weeps over "our friend Lazarus" (John 11:11) and is identified as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 11:19). Jesus even addresses Judas as "friend" on the night Jesus is arrested (Matthew 26:50).

Friendship with God may sound a little too cozy for those trying to reconcile the immanence and transcendence of God. There is good reason to be cautious, but outright dismissal ignores cen-

turies of tradition reminding us of God's desire for friendship with and for creation. Friendships initiated by God are further sustained by particular gestures and commitments of faithfulness.

A Mutual Attraction to the Gospel Life

God's friendship requires a meeting place where God can go to work on us and where we see the possibilities and chal-

lenges of a friendship with God. For Christians, that gathering place is worship.

The baptismal font marks the place where holy friendships begin not simply as an attraction to the people who surround the font, but to the God who befriends us and calls us into an often friendless world. Here we are introduced to stories that tell of welcoming the stranger, forgiving the enemy, and describing as family those for whom water is thicker than blood. Baptism also disrupts our tendencies to be friendly only with those we most agree with or like. We do not choose those God calls into community but are chosen and joined together in God's redemptive acts of salvation.

Similarly, the communion table becomes a place of renewal, rest, and encouragement that shapes our friendship with God and with one another. We are called by God and joined at the table by others deemed worthy by God to be called friend. The procession to the communion table may cause us to rejoice at being included or to wonder how we could possibly have become entangled in such a community. These are the people we are called to honor, care for, be servants of, be at peace with, and forgive.

Holy friendships also are enlivened and held accountable by acts of singing, reading Scripture together, and praying. Shared music is a common passage for finding our way through what may otherwise be an inexpressible journey of joy, grief, hope, or uncertainty. It should not be surprising that following the attacks of September 11, 2001, people looking for comfort, meaning, and companionship—the very gifts of friendship—turned to the church. Every occasion of worship is a rehearsal for the time when the world will ask to be shown the place, the language, and the presence of a loving God who offers a holy friendship.

We also must be on guard that the holy friendships we form within the church leave room for interruption by other persons and other ideas. The higher the level of certainty about who our friends are, the greater the risk that we have neglected the depth and breadth of God's friendship. Communities of holy friendship are not about finding assemblies of people who always like each other, but instead who have developed the capacity to love one another even when they are unlikable.

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Holy Friendship Among the Flock

Holy friendships seem to be a particular challenge for clergy. Many of us have been taught that friendship with a parishioner is a high-ranking, ecclesial no-no.

Many laity—often including the pastor's spouse and children—find this attitude surprising and very odd. "Are you trying to tell me," one pastor asked another, "that friendships for the modern pastor are somehow more complicated than they were for Jesus?" Well, yes and no.

If the pastor is simply an analyst or counselor, better to find friends other than the counseled. And, to be fair, spiritual leaders such as Teresa of Avila warned of the consequences that special friendships pose within one's religious community. But much of the controversy about these friendships seems to be more closely linked to the definitions of friendship.

For instance, holy friendship is not about sharing *everything*. Few of us have shared every detail of our life with our spouse or partner because some details are irrelevant and because some things may actually cause harm. There is such a thing as loving restraint. In a world that increasingly defines intimacy as "telling all we know," prudence of speech is a welcome gesture.

Indiscretions of speech violate a holy friendship. In the case of clergy and parishioner, it also violates the pastoral office. There are times when cultivating and nurturing a holy friendship requires speaking difficult truths plainly. It does not mean that we articulate every thought, especially if those thoughts do harm to the individual or the community. Pastors have an opportunity to model and shape holy silence as well as holy speech in the patterns of their friendships and relationships.

Holy friendships among clergy and laity have less to do with *whether* we participate in these relationships and more to do with *how* we live in the midst of such friendships. How do we honor the intimacies and information we share with one another? How do we acknowledge that our friendships are chosen as much—and perhaps more—than we choose them? How do clergy and laity hold one another accountable in these relationships and learn to welcome and let go of one another as transitions take place?

Not Hired Hands, but Friends

"I do not call you servants any longer . . ." Jesus said to his disciples in the farewell passages of John's Gospel. "But I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (15:15). Holy friendships have a larger purpose beyond the friendship itself: Holy friendships point us toward God. They allow us to discover and reveal the gracious acts of God at work in our lives.

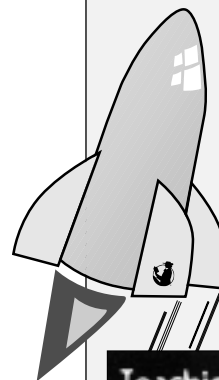
Many of us, perhaps particularly clergy, spend our life concealing and containing ourselves from others. We yearn for friendships but also cautiously guard our territory. We allow ourselves to see and be seen, but we control when to touch or be touched, when to conceal our passion and emotions and when to reveal them. To be made known to another is not to live without boundaries but to clarify how those boundaries reflect God's purposes.

That's why holy friendships are necessarily connected to Christ-shaped communities. We need the ancient and modern voices, practices, traditions, and liturgies to sustain us. We need holy friends of the flock who keep us from self-deception, who remind us when our vices are masking as virtues or our tolerance is being used to isolate rather than welcome others. We need the waters of baptism to flow through our lives and interrupt our self-selecting relationships as well as remind us of the grace that allows us to be joined with a wider community than we would create on our own.

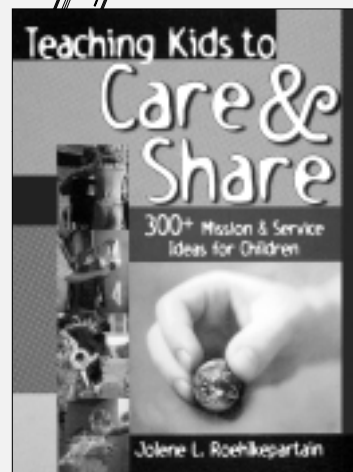
Where are our friends? Some days we feel surrounded; at other times, we search. Whether and how we are genuinely available to one another has less to do with how we *make* friends and much more to do with how God and a Christ-centered community shape our friendships. □



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