

Holy Relations: The Cost of Friendship
John 21:15-21
February 18, 2007

Today I conclude my series on this Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent, with the topic of holy friendship. A British publication once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. Among the thousands of answers received were the following: ? "One who multiplies joys, divides grief, and whose honesty is inviolable." ? "One who understands our silence." ? "A volume of sympathy bound in cloth." ? "A watch that beats true for all time and never runs down." ? The winning definition read: "*A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out.*" Now, that kind of constant friend is truly Christlike.

I want to return to the New Testament and the Greek word for friendship, which is *filia* or *fileus*. In the New Testament, if you were to use a Greek concordance, you find that the word *filia* appears only about twenty-five times or so. It appears nowhere in Mark, three times in Matthew, only once in Luke, and only once in all of Paul's undisputed letters. In John's gospel, however, it appears thirteen times. It appears in instances of poignant love such as twice in describing Jesus' love for Lazarus and his family, in Jesus' love for the Beloved disciple, John himself. It is described as the love that represents the pull of the world in opposition to God. It is used to describe Jesus' love for the disciples in the "I am" statement of the True Vine and how Jesus the true vine gives sustenance to us, the branches. But most of all, it appears in the final post-resurrection conversation between Jesus and Peter. Peter's last encounter with Jesus' before his death was on that cold night in front of a charcoal fire when Peter, full of fear for his life, denies Jesus three times and weeps bitterly as the cock crows three times.

But Peter gets a second chance with the post-resurrection Jesus in chapter 21. In front of another charcoal fire Jesus feeds the disciples a meal of broiled fish and bread. Then this conversation happens between Peter and Jesus. Read chapter 21:15-21. The words that Jesus and Peter use for love are different in this interchange, and some commentaries make no big deal of that, but I want to reenact that drama with the nuance of the difference. Simon, Son of John, do you love me no matter what, more than any of these? Lord, you know that you are my friend. Feed my sheep. Simon, son of John, do you love me know matter what? Lord, you know that you are my friend. Tend my lambs. Simon, son of John, are you my brother? Lord, I can't believe you would ask me that again. You know that you are my brother! Feed my sheep. When you were young, brother, you used to lift yourself up by your own belt. But at the end of your life, you will no longer be in control and you will die a martyr for me. Follow me now! Do you feel the power of that interchange? Jesus adapts his language of love to meet Peter right where he was at that time. He gives him total forgiveness and redemption from his earlier denial. In short he shows us in one scene what holy friendship really looks like. Holy friendship is *costly*; holy friendship is *intimate*; holy friendship is always *encouraging*. Let's look a little closer and hold your friendships up to the measuring sticks that Jesus shows us.

Holy friendship is costly. There's one little phrase that Jesus uses that has always bothered me. He says, "Do you love me more than these?" What are the these that he is talking about? Most think he is comparing Peter's love for the other disciples who were there to his love for Jesus. But that would be very out of character for Jesus to compare in that way. I think Jesus is actually pointing to the dead catch of fish by the fire. Why? Peter was a fisherman. That's how he made his livelihood and how he would have

derived his identity. Jesus is saying, “Now that I am gone, are you really ready to give this up for me?” When I was first hearing the voice of God calling me to ministry I was at the top of my sales game. I was also at the height of my drinking career. I remember one night I was in the bar with my best customer friend. His name is Ron. I had grown close to Ron in business and as a personal friend. I was so close to Ron that I shared my dream of becoming a pastor. Ron knew me well. He held up his highball of scotch and said, “Yeah Andy, but are you ready to give up this?” He didn’t refer to the money or the thrill of the competition of sales. He knew those were big things to walk away from. He referred instead to the craving that we both shared. Friendship with God and friendship with God’s people always involves a high cost, a sacrifice.

Holy friendship always involves genuine intimacy. Peter says to Jesus, “Lord you know me!” There was no use putting on any pretense with Jesus. You know when you are with a friend when you can be completely yourself without any fear of being found out. C. Raymond Beran writes the following: *What is a friend? Friends are people with whom you dare to be yourself. Your soul can be naked with them. They ask you to put on nothing, only to be what you are. They do not want you to be better or worse. When you are with them, you feel as a prisoner feels who has been declared innocent. You do not have to be on your guard. You can say what you think, as long as it is genuinely you. Friends understand those contradictions in your nature that lead others to misjudge you. With them you breathe freely. You can avow your little vanities and envies and hates and vicious sparks, your meannesses and absurdities, and in opening them up to friends, they are lost, dissolved on the white ocean of their loyalty. They understand. You do not have to be careful. You can abuse them, neglect them, tolerate them. Best of all, you can keep*

still with them. It makes no matter. They like you. They are like fire that purges to the bone. They understand. You can weep with them, sing with them, laugh with them, and pray with them. Through it all--and underneath--they see, know, and love you. A friend? What is a friend? Just one, I repeat, with whom you dare to be yourself. Holy friendship survives the risk of being found out and accepted anyway, just as you are.

Lastly, holy friendship is ultimately encouraging and affirming. As tough as Jesus could be on Peter, he was ultimately encouraging in his relationship. When Peter was at his lowest, when he betrayed Jesus he shivered in front of that charcoal fire. Jesus, in his post-resurrection appearance, re-enacted that scene (charcoal fire, three questions to test his faith) as he lifted him up in affirmation. When everyone else had walked out on Peter, Jesus walked in. Berlin -- Jesse Owens seemed sure to win the long jump at the 1936 games. The year before he had jumped 26 feet, 8 1/4 inches -- a record that would stand for 25 years. As he walked to the long-jump pit, however, Owens saw a tall, blue eyed, blond German taking practice jumps in the 26-foot range. Owens felt nervous. He was acutely aware of the Nazis' desire to prove "Aryan superiority," especially over blacks. At this point, the tall German introduced himself as Luz Long. "You should be able to qualify with your eyes closed!" he said to Owens, referring to his two jumps. For the next few moments the black son of a sharecropper and the white model of Nazi manhood chatted. Then Long made a suggestion. Since the qualifying distance was only 23 feet, 5 1/2 inches, why not make a mark several inches before the takeoff board and jump from there, just to play it safe? Owens did and qualified easily. In the finals Owens set an Olympic record and earned the second of four golds. The first person to congratulate him was Luz Long -- in full view of Adolph Hitler. Owens never again saw

Long, who was killed in World War II. "You could melt down all the medals and cups I have," Owens later wrote, "and they wouldn't be a plating on the 24-carat friendship I felt for Luz Long."

Ultimately the source of the human friendships that are the basis for good living grow out of our relationship with God. As Christians our goal in this life is to have friendship with God and friendship with people. We are about to enter the season of Lent that begins with our Ash Wednesday services this coming week. I invite you all to enter a period of introspection and building a closer friendship with Christ. We have daily devotionals in the Narthex that I invite you to take with you this morning; we have Thursday night simple dinners and devotionals led by Maggie Johnson. I will begin leading a 7 am. Wednesday time of prayer and meditation to build friendship with Christ. I invite you to be a part of all of these activities.

Three weeks ago I took part in an interfaith dinner dialog. At this dinner we had fourteen people. Most were Christians of different denominations. We also had an agnostic, two Buddhist, two Jews and a Muslim. We took turns answering questions about our faith experience. We went around the circle until it came time for our new Muslim friend to share. The question was, "have you ever felt a physical presence of your God?" His answer was unforgettable. He said, "the discipline of praying five times a day to God for most of my life has been powerful and never rote. Because of that discipline, I have come to feel God's breath on my shoulder every day." That, sisters and brothers is holy friendship. May you also feel that same presence this day and in all the days to come.