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A Theology of Friendship

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In the sense in which a man can ever be said to be at home in the world, he is at home not through dominating, or explaining, or appreciating, but through caring and being cared for.

Milton Mayeroff

A Theology of Friendship

by Paul Anderson

Among the treasures which make life worth living, one stands out as the most precious and yet the most precarious. It is precious because it gives meaning to all that we do and accomplish. It is precarious because it is alive, and like all living things, without continual care and attention, it withers and dies. This treasure is *friendship*.

The task of developing a theology of friendship is a difficult one. The only time "friendship" (or *philia*) is used in the New Testament is in the negative sense (James 4:4) when James condemns friendship with the world as hostility toward God. On the other hand, the most central thrust of all that scripture teaches has to do with friendship because the key theme of scripture is the restoration of relationships.

The intent of the story about Adam and Eve's fall, for instance, was to explain why we, as creatures made in the image of God, seem to be estranged from God. The next episode describes the beginning of enmity between persons, as we see the slaying of one brother by another.

The importance of God's covenant with Adam was the promise that God would proceed to restore the brokenness of people's relationships with God and one another. The people of promise would be blessed, and they, in turn, would become a blessing to the peoples of the earth.

The impact that following the commandments of Moses would have was to be nothing short of a new society in which people feared God, acted with integrity, and lived at peace with one another. No longer were men and women free to lie, to covet, to steal, to kill, or to commit adultery. They were now under a covenant which replaced a law of harmful individualism with a standard which preserved and protected the rights of persons and their relationships with one another. It is only the abuse of the commandments that makes them binding as opposed to liberating. Their sole intent has always been to help people get along with other people, and the fact that they were given by God says something about the way God must value good relationships.

This makes the "new covenant" described in Hebrews as much more understandable.

After those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and

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they shall be my people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizens, and everyone his brother saying, "Know the Lord," for all shall know me. From the greatest to the least of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. (Hebrews 8:10-12)

By the fulfillment of the new covenant, humans can now enter into a new relationship with God in a new and powerful way. The revelation of the new covenant through Christ was nothing short of the restoration of the basic yearning and need of creation: for persons to be reunited with their God, and therefore reconciled to themselves and to one another.

FRIENDSHIP DEFINED

Friendship may be defined as a relational union between persons which is valued and invested in by those involved. There are different levels of friendship and there are as many types of friendships as there are combinations of personalities. Over all, though, when people are attracted by their commonalities and are challenged to grow by one another's distinctives, this may produce a relationship in which they give of themselves as well as receive. This becomes a valued union known as friendship.

It is a good thing that some friendships are at varying degrees of intimacy, because intimacy by

its inclusive intensity is necessarily exclusive, thus, having *many* intimate friends is a contradiction of terms. Picture a cone which is full of marbles. Up at the top there is room for quite a few marbles, and at the very bottom of the cone there is only room for one. Furthermore, in order to move a marble to a deeper level, it must displace one which is at the deeper level.

So it is with relationships. At the surface level, there is a lot of room for acquaintances, but the deeper we go, the less time and energy there are to maintain such relationships. This is one way in which relationships are vastly different from other investments. If you put money in a bank, it will draw interest. Relationships, however will not even hold their own unless renewed investments are made.

It is true that some people have a greater capacity for intimacy than others, and that some relationships can pick up right where they left off despite months of separation. Applications of the "cone" illustration may vary, but the key question is how to cultivate meaningful relationships whether they are casual or close. In looking at uses of the word "friend" in scripture, these levels and types of relationships are further illustrated.

A FRIEND AS A CASUAL ACQUAINTANCE

Even though most friendships will be on a casual level of acquaintance which are dictated by people being in the same circumstances together, the New Testament example is clear that we are responsible for our neighbors. Our neighbors are those around us whom we perceive to be in need. For Jews, this included even the Samaritans they would rather ignore. For us, our neighbors may involve persons of other races, ideologies, economic brackets, and yes, even other branches of Quakerism. If there is a need, we are to respond accordingly with love.

Jesus illustrated the act of befriending another by reaching out

to Zaccheus. As a tax-gatherer, Zaccheus had been employed by Rome to collect money from his townspeople. Not only was he considered less than a citizen by the Romans, but he was deplored as a traitor by his own family, friends and countrymen as well. Jesus reached out to this person in social isolation and befriended him. He even risked slander by entering his home. Where others were filled with disgust over Zaccheus' alliances, Jesus was moved with compassion and he met his need just as he was.

A FRIEND AS ONE WHO IS CHOSEN

Beyond the circumstances which draw two strangers together, there is a deeper level of friendship by which friends choose one another. Some of the most tender portraits we have of Jesus arise out of the context of his relationships with Martha, Mary and Lazarus. In John 11 we see Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha. He is comfortable there, and it seems as though he's been there many a time before. One Jewish historian relates accounts of Jesus and Lazarus spending many a long evening on the roof of their house, gazing at the stars, discussing the work of the kingdom. Perhaps the most human portrayal of our Lord comes as Jesus views the tomb of his beloved friend Lazarus. John records simply, "Jesus wept."

In Luke 15 friends are given a special place. When the shepherd finds the sheep and when the widow finds her coin, they rejoice with their friends. On the other hand, when Job suffers, his three friends come to comfort him. While some friends are chosen because of a common task or a common value, some friends are chosen because they are loved. Indeed, a friend is one with whom we divide our sorrows and multiply our joys. Jesus loved his friends in a beautiful human way, and so may we.

What I believe is to be the most powerful friendship passage is John 15:12-17 from which we in the Society of Friends draw our

name. Jesus no longer calls us servants, but he calls us friends because we are to follow his commands. Here, the word "friend" bears little semblance to a nice social relationship. We are his friends because we are looking in the same direction as he is, and we are partners in the same work. This is the strongest form of chosenness, because we become members of one another. We are comrades, and our successes and failures are shared by all.

A FRIEND AS A COMPANION

To be yoked with Christ in his work means that we become his partners, but we share that calling with a very few who are our companions. These are the few with whom we share our thoughts and our feelings and, basically, our lives. Companion friendship is an extension of family love. In this sense, a friend is one who sticks "closer than a brother." While other levels of friendship depend on circumstances or commonalities, companionship is based on the commitment of one person to another. This type of love transcends the obstacles to friendship because it seeks to develop the bond of intimacy above all else. It loves persons because of who they are; and in spite of who they are. It will withstand any storm.

It is this type of love that Jesus demonstrated for us, by laying down his life for us, his friends. As with all types of friendship, this one is especially based on giving, not getting. It finds life by releasing it. It makes us able to give of ourselves because we love our Lord, and because Jesus Christ first loved us.

In theologizing about friendship, I conclude by saying that good relationships between God, ourselves, and others form the basis for good friendships. While there are different levels of friendships, all can be meaningful. We see in Jesus a model for friendships, and in the ultimate experience of friendship we imitate him by laying down our lives for our friends. Q