

Faithful Friendship

“You did not choose me but I chose you.” We sometimes hear people say that you can’t choose your family but you can choose your friends. In my life, friends have become my family. Having no siblings, I feel I was guided from my youth to form friendships in which I could have a bond as close as what I imagined sibling bonds to be. Whether it was the Holy Spirit guiding me or whether it was my innate need to belong – and maybe those two are one and the same – it’s a blessing that has permeated my life.

Some years ago, a friend gave me this silver-toned bracelet with one of its eighteen links bearing the image in gold of a dog. I am a dog fanatic and she knew that a dog charm would be a good example of what I hold close to my heart. The rest of the links were blank, to eventually be replaced by other friends to represent a significant aspect of me or of our friendship. The next year, I asked friends who normally give me a birthday present each to give me a link for that bracelet. The link my friend, Deb, and her husband gave me is of two housekeys crossing over each other as we always have keys to each other’s homes. The link another close couple gave was of four hearts overlapping to represent the friendship between them and my husband, Bill, and me. Another was of the comedy/tragedy masks because that friend and I met doing theatre. And so it went. The year

after that, I asked Bill to buy me the links I'd selected to represent friends not already on my bracelet as well as *groups* of people who mean so much to me. A group of seven girlfriends with whom I celebrate birthdays each year with beautiful meals prepared by the cooks amongst us is represented by a casserole dish filled with hearts. My church family is represented, appropriately, by a gold cross. So now my wrist is encircled with all the people whose presence in my life has been one of God's greatest blessings to me.

Ecclesiastes tell us, *"Woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"* This bracelet has provided me with comfort in the darkest of times, reminding me that I am not alone but surrounded by love – and not just love itself but love in action. When my Bill passed away, I was not just *lifted up* by friends but *carried forward* in meaningful, thoughtful, practical ways in the journey that has followed.

The Bible abounds with stories of friendships. In the book of Ruth, Ruth's devotion to Naomi is beyond that of daughter-in-law obligation. She expands that relationship into friendship when she says, *"where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried"*.

In the book of Samuel, Jonathon and David form a friendship that was outside the norm based on their difference in societal standing.

Jonathan puts friendship over heartless standards and we are told in 1 Samuel 18, verse 1 that, *“the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.”*

And who can forget the steadfastness of Job’s friends? We hear in Job chapter 2, verses 11-13, *“Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place...to show him sympathy and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”* These friends not only sympathize with Job, they empathize. They themselves feel his pain because they love him. They suffer for and with him. And they were so in tune with Job as to know that words would be weak against his pain. They just sat with him in solidarity.

Pelagius was a British theologian who lived from 354–418 A.D. who wrote this:

“[W]e each need one special friend, who may be called a friend of the soul. We must open our souls completely to this friend, hiding nothing and revealing everything. And we must allow this friend to assess and judge what he sees.”

Author Mary C. Earle adds to that when she writes,

“A soul friend is a person who will allow me to tell the whole truth of myself, and to encourage me to seek healing and restoration....I know that having a soul friend makes me more fully human, allows me to become the person God calls me to be.”

As people on a faith journey, we contemplate the *nature* of – indeed the *source* – of love, love that surpasses self-interest and self-need, love that we call friendship. We find that nature and that source in God, exemplified in Jesus, and transmitted by the Holy Spirit. In a great article by Gail O’Day entitled “I Have Called You Friends”, she says, ***“Jesus gave everything to his friends—his knowledge of God and his own life. Jesus is our model for friendship— because he loved without limits—and he makes it possible for us to live a life of friendship—because we have been transformed by everything he shared with us.”***

Jesus directed us, in words and by example. In John 10, Jesus describes himself as the “good shepherd” and says, *“I lay down my life for the sheep...No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”* The sheep, of course, are us. O’Day refers to this as *“the ultimate act of friendship.”* John 15:13 expresses this sentiment by saying, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” It’s a standard far too high for most of us mere mortals, although there are many stories of people sacrificing their own lives for others. Thankfully, though, most of us will never be in a position where this ultimate act of friendship is asked of us. But, to whatever degree we are given the opportunity, we all have access to the same love source that inspires all generous movements of the heart.

In John 13, Jesus inverts the norm of servants washing the feet of hosts or masters by washing the feet of his disciples. O’Day says, *“[t]he foot washing is a sacrament of friendship... Jesus offers himself completely to his disciples... in order to give a tangible shape to his love... In the foot washing, Jesus and the disciples move from being servants and master to being friends.”*

Friendship is giving tangible shape to love. It’s the food that arrives, unsolicited, when grief is denying appetite. These are meals that

nourish and sustain the body and gestures that nourish and sustain the soul. It is the “Thinking of You” card that arrives at just the right time. It’s the steadying hand on your shoulder when you are feeling weak, the hug that extends long enough for you to know it’s not perfunctory. It is eyes locked in supportive embrace.

Proverbs 29, chapter 9 says, *“the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.”* Intimate friends are able to speak truths that are uncomfortable to hear and to listen to them as well. When sweeping things under the carpet would be far easier but bringing them into the light is the more generous act, real friends gather courage to speak out, both for the benefit of the friend and the *friendship*.

Jesus, dying on the cross, entrusted the care of his mother to his beloved friend. John 19, verses 26 and 27 read, “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, *“Woman, here is your son.”* Then he said to the disciple, *“Here is your mother.”* And from that hour the disciple took her into *his own home.*” This was a no-questions-asked exchange. Clearly, Jesus knew he could trust this disciple as a friend. They shared both trust and loyalty.

Anais Nin said, *“Each friend represents a world in us, a world not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is*

born.” We are drawn to particular people by the heart, drawn to their personalities and perspectives. And we follow that heart guide to friendship.

All friendships are of a personal *nature* because they spring from our hearts but not all friendships are on a personal *level*. We extend friendship on a broader scale to neighbours whom we might not know personally: to the less advantaged, to those who experience discrimination, to those who are victims of cruelty or injustice. We can offer that friendship as individuals and also as a group. As a church, Roncesvalles offers friendship through your Kindred Kitchen and Ways We Love the World programs.

Beyond the personal and neighbourhood levels, we extend the hand of friendship nation-to-nation manifesting on a larger scale the generosity which Jesus exemplified and to which he guides us.

We are spirit beings walking a human journey. The *bodies* we inhabit are fueled by blood pumped by the heart. And our *souls* are fueled by love imbued in us by the source of *all* love. It’s that urge to offer solace or help, that swell of the soul’s heart that happens when we laugh or cry with a friend, when we reap comfort in their very being. It’s that feeling that inspires us to be with them, to accept them as a blessing in our lives and that creates in us the desire to be a blessing

in theirs. Our physical hearts move the blood that sustains us through our bodies. Similarly, our soul's love moves through us, each of us giving and receiving. Love is the catalyst of friendship. Friendship is love in action.

And, in that we can give love and receive love but not touch love, and in that it is not part of our *physical* life, we can identify love as *spiritual* life. That spirit energy of love is born of God. God is Love. Love is God.

Whether one's circle is large or small, the ties that bind us together are precious. Written on a dear friend's gravestone is his response to the question of what was his philosophy of life. *"It's the people"*, it says. *"It's the people"*.

Albert Schweitzer said, *"At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us."* Had Schweitzer ever read the book *"Anne of Green Gables"*, he might have added to its beautiful notion of kindred spirits, that of *kindled* spirits. The Holy Spirit works through others and within us to kindle the love that is already there as part of our spirit being. May the flame of love burn strong within each of us that we can rekindle the spirits of others in true and faithful friendship.

And may we all experience what is written about in this poem that my mom taught me as a child:

*It is my joy in life to find
At every turning of the road,
The strong arm of comrade kind
To help me onward with my load.
And when there is no joy in life,
And love alone can make amends,
I have but one prayer while I live, --
God make me worthy of my friends!*

Amen.