

"ON BEING A FRIEND"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 4, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

A large moving van loaded with furniture was parked in the driveway of a suburban town north of the city. A wife and husband were busy sweeping out the open garage when a woman from a house across the street approached them with an apple pie in hand. She said,

"Welcome to the neighborhood. I baked this apple pie myself and I want you to have it!" "Really...we can't" replied the husband with a broom in hand. "Of course you can" was her reply. "When I moved in four years ago no one welcomed me, and I want you to feel at home!"

And with that she thrust the warm apple pie into the other hand of the husband. And then with some awkwardness and a slight touch of embarrassment, he said,

"We've been here for two years and now we're moving away". The woman just stared at him...dumbfounded, her mouth wide open. "Well" she said, shrugging her shoulders, "Enjoy it".

That sort of thing can happen in a lot of neighborhoods, apartment buildings and yes...even in churches. People often tell me it's hard to go up to people here in the church that they don't know for fear of welcoming someone who has been coming to church longer than they have. Somewhere along the way in our crowded, impersonal world, we seem to have lost a sense of community....a sense of neighborliness. Yes...it happens in churches, too.

DEVELOPMENT

Some people, of course, don't want to be friendly. A man went to his priest complaining that there was a lack of friendliness among members of the congregation and that people were reluctant to greet one another in church. Agreeing, the priest said that he had come up with a plan to change things....

During services the next Sunday, the priest described the situation to the congregation and said that the following Sunday they would have a brief pause to allow parishioners to turn to those seated behind them and greet them with a smile and a friendly "hello". After the service, the same man turned around to the woman behind him and said, "Good morning". She looked at him in shocked indignation and snapped, "That doesn't start until NEXT Sunday!" She quite obviously wasn't ready to be friendly. Reminds me of some people I know....

Many are finding it difficult to form friendships. High mobility of people and rapidly changing social conditions and an obsession with the superficial things of life...these along with the emphasis society puts on "self"...some are just unwilling to make the effort or the sacrifices necessary in forming close and lifelong relationships. And, in the long run, I feel they "lose out".

Let me ask you a most important question. How many close friends do you have? Pardon me for being personal, but this is a vital and important issue. Are there people you could turn to in a time of need and know that they would be there for you? Rule out family members and the "professionals"....and how do you come out. It's still true..."to have friends, you have to be a friend!"

CLOSE FRIENDS ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR LIVES

lives and how sad it would be to come to the end of our lives and report that we never had a single close friend.

Close friends are an important part of our

Remember the movie, Driving Miss Daisy? As I recall, it was based on a play by Alfred Uhry that won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize. Miss Daisy is a Jewish widow living in Atlanta in 1948. Miss Daisy needs a chauffeur because she's gotten too old to drive. She's a spirited and a crusty old woman who is prejudiced against African Americans, although she insists she is not. The man who is hired for the job...what was his name? - Hoke Colburn, a 60 year old African-American. The play is about Hoke's relationship with Miss Daisy which spans twenty-five years. As they learn about each other, they come to appreciate one another more and more.

The final scene is Thanksgiving Day. Hoke is visiting Miss Daisy. There are long pauses between the words. She asks,

"How are you?" "Doin' the best I can" he responds. "Me, too" she says. Hoke sees a piece of Thanksgiving pie on the table, which Daisy hasn't eaten yet. She tries to pick up her fork, but can't manage it. So Hoke says, "Let me help you with it"; and he cuts a small piece of pie with the fork and feeds it to her. She smiles and nods her thanks. It is a touching scene. Slowly Daisy enjoys a simple piece of pie because of Hoke's kindness. Hoke cuts another piece for her. There's no dialogue. The lights fade and the play is over.

There are many societal facts that separate Hoke and Miss Daisy, but there is also a bond that unites them - the bond of friendship and mutual respect.

Every human being needs at least one close friend. Most studies uphold that. It's important for our health and our happiness. According to current research, having friends is good for our immune system. People who have friends are sick less often than those who have no friends. They live longer and they are happier. Having friends is most important!

FRIENDS ARE NEEDED WHEN LIFE IS UNKIND

And this, too. We really need friends when life is unkind to us.

Mary Hughes once defined a friend as "the first person who comes in when the whole world has gone out". A pretty good definition. Erma Bombeck defined a friend as "somebody who doesn't go on a diet when you're fat". Another good definition.

A lawyer down in Dallas was accused of a crime that he did not commit, but he had to go to court in order to prove his innocence. His former friends were now shunning him, but there was one man who lived out in the country and was unable to come into the city for the trial...this man sent him daily letters of encouragement and support. The lawyer's name was eventually cleared and he made a trip to the country to see his friend who had supported him. The lawyer told his friend,

"Each day when things seemed to look the blackest
your letter would arrive....and then I would know
I had one real friend...and I would fight on!"

In chapter four of the Book of Ecclesiastes, verses 9 and 10, we read,

"If one falls, he shall be supported by the other:
and woe to him who is alone....for when he falleth,
he hath none to lift him up".

Do you have a friend who will lift you up when you stumble and fall? Many do not and to me, that's so sad! Remember that in Dante's Inferno, the "nethermost depths" of hell is that place where individuals are frozen in ice, unable to have the companionship of any other person. Close friends are important for our physical and psychological health. All of us need to have some friends for those moments when life is unkind to us.

And this brings us to our text for today. Jesus is talking to His disciples and He says to them something most intriguing:

"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing...but I have called you friends.. for all that I have heard of My Father, I have made them known to you". (John 15: 14- 15)

Jesus is calling us "friends". And earlier we sang, "What a friend we have in Jesus". Another of those hymns for which we don't need the hymnal. But how can we be sure He is a friend, our friend. John's Gospel is suggesting two ways.

THE CROSS TELLS US SO

First, the testimony and the evidence given to us in the cross.

"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends..."

And this is exactly what He did. He laid down His life for us. The wondrous thing about Christ is how His deeds match His words. He not only taught us that there is no greater love that a person can have for another than that he or she lay down his life - but He laid down His life for us. We are Christ's friends. We see it in the sacrifice He made in our behalf. Why, we wonder, was Christ willing to make such a sacrifice. Obviously He believes we are worth every bit of it.

Dennis and Barbara Rainey tell us about two boyhood friends named Johnny and Marty, both of whom loved baseball. They also thought the world of each other. They were such good friends that they made a pact to always play ball together....regardless of what happened. They would let nothing separate them. As time went on, Johnny became a baseball star and his coach one day called him aside and told him about the upcoming tryouts for the minor leagues. Johnny said,

"That's just great....Marty and I will sign up right away...."

But the coach responded,

"Don't worry about Marty...he's just an ugly duckling.... too skinny....too slow...and can't field and can't hit." But Johnny's response was, "Look....I know he can make it if he has a chance...he's got determination...he can learn to hit and to field."

Sure enough, training camp resulted in a contract for Johnny...but Marty was cut. However, Johnny wouldn't sign without Marty, so the club gave in and gave them both a contract. And motivated by his friend's actions, Marty slowly began to improve. During their third year in the minor leagues Johnny washed up and quit, but Marty continued to hang in there and became a rising star. Eventually he was called up to the majors for the St. Louis Cardinals as a shortstop. He went on to play in four World Series and seven All-Star Games and in 1944 was named the MVP of the National League. Raise a hand if you know who we're talking about. Years later Marty's mom had asked his friend, Johnny, "Why are you so determined to keep this pact?" And Johnny replied,

"Belief is a kind of love. I believe in Marty. He's my closest friend. Believing in someone is the best kind of love."

Belief, said Johnny, is the best kind of love. Remember, friend...that Christ believes in you. That is the message of the cross. Christ believed in us so much that He made the ultimate investment in us. He put his life on the line for us. The cross sends this message to us and so, too, does the Church.

THE CHURCH TELLS US

The Church tells us, too, that we are friends of The Christ. That is, after all what the church really is: a community of friends drawn to Christ. It's a group of people who will help you if you give them the chance. They will be there when you are sick and they will be there to comfort you when you are dying. You don't ever have to be alone. And that is where we find ourselves this day - among friends...friends who share the same values, the same outlook on life. Those friends are there, but you must let them know and see that you are there - in need. Your friends are not "mind-readers"....you have to let us know. Remember that, too.

"No longer do I call you servants..." said Jesus, "But I have called you friends." We have that friend in Jesus. We see it in the cross. We see it in the Church.

I don't know if any of you have read David McCullough's recent biography of Harry Truman....but there a story shared that comes to us from the end of Truman's life. To me, Harry Truman was an interesting character. He was the only president to not have a middle name and the last one to have owned and worked a farm in his early years, and also one of the few who never got to go to college. During his presidency he was called on to make some very difficult decisions. As expected, he disappointed many people and left office in 1952 with a record low approval rating. He moved back to his home in Independence, Missouri and became in a very real sense - a common citizen.

He was a man of routine and habit and many mornings he would take a walk with his neighbor, a Presbyterian minister. They developed a good friendship and it's from this minister that this story comes to us in McCullough's book.

It was a very cold February morning...late in Mr. Truman's life. The minister was officiating at a burial service for an elderly gentleman. It was cold. The wind was blowing and literally no one showed up for the graveside service. But, just before the appointed time, Mr. Truman's green Chrysler pulled up, by that time driven by a Secret Service agent. Mr. Truman got out and slowly walked, with the help of a cane, to the graveside. With only President Truman in attendance, the service began and ended minutes later. On the walk back to the car the minister looked at Mr. Truman and said,

"Mr. Truman, why are you here? It's cold and bitter. You really shouldn't be out on a day like this!". Mr. Truman looked at him through his thick glasses and said, "Pastor....I never forget a friend".

And in that way Harry Truman was a lot like His Lord. Jesus never forgot nor forgets His friends. Remember that.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

An aging man recently told how he had been a part of the invasion of Normandy in June of 1944. A member of an elite airborne unit, he had parachuted behind enemy lines on the night of June 5th, 1944. Anticipating that many of the troops dropped in the darkness behind enemy lines might become separated and lost, Allied commanders had given each soldier a small metal clicker to hold. As these paratroopers groped their way through woods and forests and fields, they would click once or twice and then wait for a response. If their signal was greeted by the sound of another clicker, then they knew they had located an ally - a friend.

I thought to myself...if this were a message for the children of our church, I would have gone out and found clickers and handed them out to each child. And then I would ask them to click them together....as a signal...as a reminder.... that we are allies together with the Living Christ. He does not call us servants, but rather He calls us friends. He showed His love for us through the cross and then by giving us the Church - His family and our family, too. In this place, each of us has a friend. And what a Friend we have in Jesus. And with that privilege, there goes this responsibility - that we, too, must always try to be a friend to someone else.

PRAYER

And now draw us, O God, out of ourselves...out of our isolation and into a community of great believers...for we are brothers and sisters here together in this church. Remind us that "no man...no woman is an island unto him or herself"....for our lives are connected together. Help us to overcome that touch of shyness that keeps us from reaching out to others...

Visit our sick with the tender assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with your warming and healing touch. Point out markers along the way to those who may have lost or be in danger of losing their way. The race is short even at its longest and we would try to run it well and always to Your glory. Amen.