

THE WAY OF JESUS
"II. With His Friends"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION The sermons during Lent this year are exploring the way of Jesus not only in meeting difficult life situations, but also in dealing with people. Last Sunday morning we reviewed together the way of Jesus in a time of great decision. Today we turn to consider and explore the way of Jesus with His friends.

DEVELOPMENT Someone once wrote that Sinclair Lewis had a world famous name, two marriages and an income that was more than adequate for a life of comfort. Yet, an author reviewing his life said that he died "a pauper in comradeship". A person without a friend is indeed the poorest of mortals.

A passage in Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" illustrates some of the emotional tragedy of our time. Charlotta finds an impenetrable wall around the heart of the man she loves. Confused and bewildered, she cries:

"I am so lonely...always so lonely; no one belongs to me and...who am I, what I exist for - nobody knows!"

This is the pleading voice of many lonely people in places like New York. "I am so lonely. Nobody belongs to me." Lonely of heart and starved for companionship, they know that physical nearness to others does not necessarily satisfy the deep spiritual hunger for friendship and a lasting relationship.

MEANT FOR FELLOWSHIP Alienation. Isolation. These are enemies of mankind. Back in the very first book of the Bible there is the suggestion that it is not good "for people to be alone". This is not referring to privacy, which as we saw last Sunday in terms of decision-making is something that is good, helpful and necessary. Rather it is saying that if a person is to become a complete human being then he or she must have fellowship, affection and acceptance from those whose approval is important. Without fellowship with others, one is in danger of becoming emotionally fragmented.

Back in 1932, before his inauguration, an attempt was made on the life of Franklin Roosevelt. This would-be assassin, having fired his shots which killed a man next to the President, was quickly taken into custody. In an effort to find out if he represented any organized hostility, he was asked if he belonged to a group. "No" he answered..."I belong only to myself". When a person belongs only to himself, he's a potential trouble-maker in my book.

Friendship is one of the oldest experiences in the world. Jesus endowed it with a deeper meaning, a deeper feeling, a finer spirit. Let's see how he did this.

INCLUSIVE First-off, it's apparent that He took an "inclusive" approach when it came to this matter of making friends.

He took in people from all walks of life, all backgrounds, all ages. Our inclination at times is to draw our friends from our own age group, from our own economic, social, cultural and racial background. His approach was different. He associated with all types - the "ins" and the "outs". His positive,

out-reaching and searching love for people was expressed with genuine warmth. Instead of judging people, He helped people. We need to remember that in a time when the traditionalists had no dealing with Samaritans and as few as possible with the Gentiles, He numbered both among his circle of friends.

And children? They saw in Him a friend. On one occasion Jesus is said to have remarked,

"Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones...it were better for him that a millstone were hanged around his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

And women? ERA supporters would have cheered for Him for He was departing from the old idea of women's subordination. He treated them as persons in their own right. He was their champion in a day when womanhood needed a champion. Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church, writing in one of his books forty years ago, said:

"They were drawn to Him alike by their need, and by His masterful personality and message. They came for healing, for forgiveness, for power to lead a new life, and for His benediction on their children."

There's great enrichment to be gained from a circle of friends that is inclusive. I always enjoy gatherings where there is a mix of people. And to me this is one of the wonderful things about living in a place like New York. I believe we miss out on a lot of good things if we tend to mix only with those who are like ourselves.

A newspaper once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. The reward went to a boy who penned this line:

"A friend is a fellow who knows all about you and who likes you just the same."

SELF-GIVING A second thing to consider in terms of Jesus and friendship is that there was always an element of "self-giving" involved. Freely, He shared His life...His energies with others. On one occasion He even said to His disciples:

"Love on another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this...that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15: 13)

He believed it and He practiced it.

I have the uneasy feeling that many of our friendships in life are formed from the point of view of "what can this person do for me". In other words, so many friendships are calculating, self-seeking. Too often we're interested in others for what they can do for us. We want to get to know that person because we figure he may be able to help us in our work or in our career. A young woman in conversation with her pastor remarked to him,

"You know...we have so much entertaining we have to do in connection with my husband's business that I never feel free to make some new friends. It's essential to his

career that we mix with them socially...."

I'm not suggesting that we be insensitive to business and moral obligations, but what I'm saying is that when career and social position cause us to use people as objects and things for our own advantage, then we have sadly missed one of life's deepest rewards.

I've always liked this simple prayer voiced by Georgia Harkness:

"Give me, O God, the understanding heart,
The quick discernment of the soul to see,
Another's inner wish, the hidden part
of him that - wordless - speaks for sympathy".

DEMANDING Inclusive. Self-giving. Third, we find that Jesus made certain demands on those whom He called "friend". Remember those words from John's Gospel, "Ye are my friends...if - you do whatsoever I command you".

Surfacewise, it may sound a bit severe, a bit unlike Him. However, this line must be read and understood within its context. Jesus was not a dreamy sentimentalist when it came to human nature. He knew that many are called and that few respond. He was intent on leading a chosen few beyond casual acquaintance into a deeper relationship of commitment and loyalty. And He was making it clear to them along the way that it would be costly to be His friend.

Said Jesus, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." (Luke 9: 62) And when the Sons of Zebedee came to Him asking for a place of position, a place of prominence in His Kingdom, He saked, "Are ye able...able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of."

He was seeking the complete allegiance of His disciples. There were to be no "ifs", no "ands", no "buts". His commitment to them was without reservation. He was not holding back, and He expected this same quality, this same response from them. Again quoting from Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick:

"He braided them into friendship with Himself and with each other....so close that the community did what no isolated believer could ever have done...it survived... it survived the shock of the crucifixion, the agony of sustained persecution, the frailties of its members, and the discouragement of its campaign. On that group of friends, the Master counted for His work."

If we believe at all in Him, in His ways, His teachings, then we cannot be lukewarm or halfway in our response. He demands of us a personal relationship that is total, complete. His was a friendship that was inclusive, self-giving, and demanding.

AND OUT OF THIS... In this friendship offered to people, He was laying the "foundation stones" for the Church which is bound so closely to Him that we often speak of it as "the body of Christ". Out of this unique and wonderful fellowship emerged the Church. The Church is KOINONIA - that is, it is a place where you know as you are known, a place where you meet

the Eternal in your friend. It's a fellowship where you can remove the mask and come as you are.

Let me take this a step or two further. There ought to be in our churches far more of a mutual concern for each other's life and growth than there is. We ought to pray for one another more than we do. We ought to accept and appreciate and comfort and love and restore each other more than we do. This ought not to be left to one or two who by ordination assume this as a life's work. It ought not to be left to 10 or more people in a prayer or study group to do it for all. YOU are the CHURCH. You are the body of Christ - His friends. "Bear one another's burdens" said Paul in Galatians, chapter 6, verse 2. If our faith is to be nourished into real strength, we must have the upbuilding of each other in the framework of the Christian fellowship.

A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

In all of this there emerges a challenge not only for us as individuals, but also for the Church.

The Church must strive to reflect in its life those qualities which are descriptive of the way of our Lord in extending friendship.

Yes, it must be inclusive - socially, racially, theologically. The world knows that Christianity preaches the unity of God's family, but does it always practice the same in its life? It must offer the spirit of friendship in the name of Christ to all. An unknown author forcefully expresses a great truth in these lines:

"I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see.
I sought my God, but my God eluded me.
I sought my brother, and I found all three."

Yes, it must be self-giving. It must be willing to lose its life and never hold itself aloof from human need. It must resist the temptation to become a walled-off, comfortable group of people out of touch with the struggles taking place in our world today. The Church that is willing to be "open" - to lose its life for Christ's sake will surely find it.

And finally, yes - the Church must also make demands on its members, its friends. This we do in the name of Christ and no other. Half-hearted, "lukewarm" commitments are not what our Lord sought. So many times we are afraid to make demands on people for fear of frightening them away. We don't want to rock the boat. I am more and more convinced than ever before in my own ministry that the churches that are "high demand" churches are the ones that will be around in the next decade. And the others - like old soldiers "will just fade away". So let's be a "high demand" church...perhaps some one will give me an "amen" on that.

CONCLUSION

There was a cartoon in the Wall Street Journal some time back that I clipped and tucked in my sermon notebook. It showed a ruddy, round faced priest, sitting comfortably behind a large desk in a plush office. In front of the desk stood a lean, eager young priest apparently just starting out in the ministry. The older priest was saying to the younger priest:

"The trick is to deliver a sincere, frank, honest sermon which makes them feel it applies to others, but not to them."

Think of these things now in terms of your own life. Think of them in terms of our own Church. If not here, where? If not now, when? He is calling to each of us in these moments....to be His friend, to walk with Him. To walk with the King. He offers us the greatest friendship of all...and it's ours for simply the taking. "Walk with the King and be a blessing to others"

PRAYER

O God, our Father...

As we stand and look at the person of Christ in this Lenten Season....trying to understand His ways better than we have in the past and trying to enter into a closer personal relationship with Him, help us always to stand loyal to Him, remembering how He included all people among His circle of friends, how He gave of Himself, and how, in turn, He made high demands on those whom He called friend. In His name and spirit we now pray. Amen.

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This is the pleading voice of many lonely in our large cities. "I am so lonely. Nobody belongs to me." Lonely of heart and starved for companionship, they know that physical nearness to others does not necessarily satisfy the deep spiritual hunger for friendship and a lasting relationship.

MEANT FOR FELLOWSHIP

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INCLUSIVE

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Gloria Steinem

And women...the "~~women libbers~~" would have cheered for Him for He was departing from the old idea of women's subordination. He treated them as persons in their own right. He was their champion in a day when womanhood needed a champion. Harry Emerson Fosdick of the Riverside Church, writing in one of his books forty years ago, said:

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"You know...we have so much entertaining we have to do in connection with my husband's business that I never feel free to make some new friends. It's essential to his career that we mix with them socially....."

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Let's take this a step further in terms of the Church. in the moments that remain.

There ought to be in our churches far more of a mutual concern for each other's life and growth than there is. We ought to pray for one another more than we do. We ought to accept and appreciate and comfort and love and restore each other more than we do. This ought not to be left to one who by ordination assumes this as his life's work. You are the Church. You are the body of Christ - His friends. "Bear one another's burdens" said Paul in Galatians. If our faith is to be nourished into real strength, we must have the upbuilding of each other in the framework of the Christian fellowship.

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Finally, the Church must also make demands on its members, its friends. This we do in the name of Christ and no other. ~~We ought never to permit our people to become complacent, or "half-hearted" or "lukewarm" in their commitment. So many times we are afraid to make demands on people for fear of frightening them away. We don't want to rock the boat.~~ I am more convinced than ever before in my ministry that the church that are "high demand" churches are the ones that will be around in the next decade. The others will fade away into oblivion.

CONCLUSION

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CLOSING PRAYER

O God, our Father, as we stand and look at the person of Jesus Christ in this Lenten Season....trying to understand His ways better than we have in the past and trying to enter into a closer personal relationship with Him...help us always to stand loyal to Him remembering how He included all people among his circle of friends, how he gave of Himself to them, and how, in turn, He ~~demanded the highest and the best of them~~ made high demands on those whom he called - friend. In His name and spirit we pray.