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John 15:9-17 (NE)

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"NOT SERVANTS BUT FRIENDS"

Would you like to stand one day in the presence of God, with Jesus Christ at your side, and have the latter say to the former, while pointing at you, "Father, this is a dear friend of mine?"

The relationship between friends is a beautiful and precious thing. It has been extolled by the poets and savants almost to an extreme and has seemingly had a universal appeal to all peoples everywhere throughout history.

I was given a little book the other day by a member of the congregation who is an admirer of the North American Indians. In it, I read these words about friendship among the Indians:

"Friendship is held to be the severest test of character. It is easy, we think, to be loyal to family and clan whose blood is in our own veins. Love between man and woman is founded on the mating instinct and is not free from desire and self-seeking. But, to have a friend and to be true under any and all trials is the mark of a man...It is the essence of comradeship and fraternal love, without thought of pleasure or gain, but rather for moral support and inspiration. Each is vowed to die for the other, if need be, and nothing is denied the brother-friend, but neither is anything required that is not in accord with the highest conceptions of the Indian mind."*

It is interesting to observe that today we often feel worse when we hear of a friendship being destroyed than when we hear of a marriage being dissolved. Perhaps it is because the latter is so common in our society. The fracture of a deep and meaningful friendship will often elicit from us lamentation and pity whereas the fracture of a marriage will cause us only to observe, "Oh, another one. Too bad." And, of course, the most beautiful and secure marriages, we are reminded, are those in which husband and wife are each other's "best friend".

So beautiful and holy is this relationship between friends that Shakespeare has Polonius admonish his son Laertes,

"The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."

II

What then is this relationship between two people which we call friendship? It is another case, I fear, of taking something for granted and assuming an understanding which, in reality, we may not have. For example, Webster defines friendship as "an attachment between persons arising from esteem and goodwill." But surely most of us would argue

*The Soul of the Indian, Eastman

that we feel more than that toward the person we consider to be our dearest friend.

Let Diogenes, a philosopher of the fifth century before Christ, describe for us the deeper meaning of friendship: "A friend," said he, "is one soul abiding in two bodies." It is a lovely description, is it not? A friend is one who understands. A friend is one who reads our mind and heart and not just our words and actions. A friend is one who is able to put himself in our place. One soul abiding in two bodies!

What a blessed and precious thing is that kind of friendship. Unfortunately, men do not have the close and intimate friendships that women often have. They do not communicate as well and their pride perhaps stands in their way, barring them from sharing their innermost thoughts. They have been taught that it is not "manly" to do so, but, on the contrary, is a sign of weakness. Rather, I would say, it is a weakness in man not to be able so to share.

Think, if you will, what the absence of friendship can mean as we see it in the New Testament: the Prodigal Son eating the husks of corn intended for the swine because all of his former and fair-weather friends had deserted him and "no man gave unto him"; Lazarus outside the rich man's house, the dogs licking his sores because he had no friend to care about him; the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda who believed he could not be cured because he had no friend to help him into the water when the angel came to the pool; Paul, writing to Timothy that all men had forsaken him; and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsamene, when the Gospel tells us, "They all forsook him and fled." He had no friend.

Life, indeed, is empty when one has no friends. The Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes tells us of the consequences of having no friend upon whom one can rely, "...Woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath no one to help him up."

Most of us are fortunate if we have one or two good friends in a lifetime. We may have many acquaintances but true friends are more than acquaintances, more than those with whom we can casually and pleasantly spend an occasional hour or two.

It is related that Elizabeth Barrett Browning once asked the great English clergyman and novelist, Charles Kingsley, "What is the secret of your life? Tell me that I may make mine beautiful, too." And Kingsley replied, "I had a friend."

III

There is little doubt that the friend to whom Kingsley referred was Jesus Christ. He is the friend who has made such a difference in so many lives.

That brings us to the passage in the Gospel of John which we shared earlier, "I call you servants no longer," said Jesus to his disciples, "I have called you friends." A servant obeys out of fear and a sense of obligation; a friend acts out of love. It is a difference as great as the difference between night and day.

In fact, the whole passage in the Gospel of John emphasizes the love that is implicit in real friendship. It is the same passage in which Jesus declares, "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend," and assures his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you."

And so, we return to the question with which the sermon began: Would you, one day, like to stand in the presence of God with Jesus Christ at your side, and have him say to the Father, pointing at you, "Father, this is a dear friend of mine?"

What glory, what joy, would then be ours! "I no longer call you servants, I call you friends."

There was, in the middle ages, an informal group of clerical and lay-Christians who called themselves "The Friends of God". With great enthusiasm and devotion, they sought holiness, not in creeds and ceremonies, but in union and fellowship with God. Their's was an attempt to put life back into a corrupt and disordered church, and out of their efforts came a literary jewel called the "Theologia Germanica" or "Book of the Perfect Life", written anonymously, a book greatly loved by Martin Luther.

These men and women were friends of God because they obeyed and served Him out of love. That is what makes for real friendship. They loved God for Himself alone, and not for anything they might get from Him. They loved and served Him because He was God and for no other reason.

That is the kind of relationship Jesus wanted his disciples to have with him. He loved them with no ulterior motive and if they were to be his friends, they must love him in the same fashion.

IV

The essence of friendship is, indeed, love--not love as it is spoken of in romantic novels and movies, but love as we see it in the New Testament. A true story may, perhaps, better reveal its nature.

It happened in 1961 when a man named Garfield Todd was prime minister of Rhodesia. He went out into a jungle area one day to look over some used fencing that was for sale. Fencing, at that time, was scarce and this fencing was still standing. He arrived late in the afternoon, found the fence, and started to follow it, examining its condition, estimating the cost of removing it, preparing to make a bid for it.

As it got late, he realized that he was quickly becoming enveloped in darkness. In following the path of the fence, he had lost his sense of direction. Now he was alone in the jungle at night but he had presence of mind enough to know that he must stay close to the fence and follow it. He could hear the jungle animals following him. He reasoned that the fence might reach a clearing where he could gain his bearings or reach a road where he might find his wife whom he was confident would be searching for him in a car.

After a long and terrible night, near dawn, he finally stumbled into a clearing and a road. Shortly, the lights of a car appeared and it was his wife. Exhausted, clothes torn, hands bleeding, he fell at her feet, rejoicing. As his love for his wife and for life had found its way out of the darkness, so her love for him had been searching within the darkness.

It is the kind of relationship you and I may have with God. God forever reaches out for us, as we reach out for Him and if we become friends with Jesus Christ and follow in the Way which he has set before us, we will, indeed, one day enter into that glorious presence where our friend will say, pointing to us, "Father, this is a dear friend of mine."