

The Sacrament of Friendship – 03/12/06 – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch, UU Church West

SERMON

In 1966, just a few months before I turned seven years old, my father was transferred from a job in one city to a new job in another city – which meant that my family had to move. We had to move, far away from the familiar landscape of fields and sidewalks in Flint, Michigan, far away from my buddies, Mark Kullaga – who lived next door, and Carole Stevens, who lived a block away. I was a timid and shy child, and the prospect of leaving everything I knew was terrifying!

But move we did, and it was every bit as awful as I'd imagined -- everything in the new neighborhood was strange and threatening.

Little did I know how soon all that would change. One hot, sultry August day not long after we had settled in to our new house in Saginaw, Michigan, as my sisters and I were idly quarrelling about what to do that afternoon, there came a thunderous knocking on the front door. My sisters and I scattered like rabbits, forcing my mom to come up from the basement to answer it.

There, standing on the doorstep was a tall, curly-haired, grey-eyed, loud-voiced girl, who demanded to know if there were any children in the new family, and if any of them were girls, and how old they were. Oh, yes, and she also wanted to know our first, last and middle names.

Her name was Janet Caswell. Janet Gay Caswell, to be exact. She was seven years old, and she became both my first friend in Saginaw, and my eternal salvation from shyness and loneliness. Janet, or "Caz" as we called her, took me under her wing, introduced me to all the other kids in the neighborhood, and basically took over my life. Janet was big and loud and bossy, but also so very bright and imaginative and compassionate. And she had a true gift for friendship.

"Friendship..." writes Unitarian Henry David Thoreau, "...is an exercise of the purest imagination and of the rarest faith."

He wrote, "My Friend is that one whom I can associate with my choicest thought. I always assign to him a nobler employment in my absence than I ever find him engaged in; and I imagine that the hours which he devotes to me were snatched from a higher society..."

"A Friend is one who incessantly pays us the compliment of expecting from us all the virtues, and who can appreciate them in us."

"The Friend asks no return but that his Friend will religiously accept and wear and not disgrace his apotheosis of him. They cherish each other's hopes. They are kind to each other's dreams...."

"We do not wish for Friends to feed and clothe our bodies ... but to do the like office to our spirit...."

“The language of Friendship is not words, but meanings. It is an intelligence above language....”

Some of you might be wondering what I might mean when I call friendship a sacrament. Sacrament is one of those very serious religious words – it sounds like something requiring wine and candles and incense, and perhaps prayers chanted in an ancient language. In traditional Christian terms, a sacrament is a means of divine grace, a way that God blesses humankind – in real time, for some Christian sects. For others, including our Protestant Christian forebears, a sacrament was a symbol or reminder of an invisible, inner grace – a transformed spiritual reality. Roman Catholics observe seven sacraments – things like baptism, confirmation, communion and anointing the sick. Other churches observe fewer sacraments, or call them “ordinances.”

But for something to be a sacrament does not mean it is tied to the practices of any one church or religion. A sacrament is what happens when a deep wholeness and profound Love are made manifest, and we are brought into communion with Life’s larger purpose.

I believe that friendships, intimate relationships of choice, are sacramental in this way. They speak in the language of meaning. They reveal to us what is of ultimate worth and value. Because they require us to risk intimacy, to step out beyond what might be convenient or comfortable, they carry Mystery, that elusive spark that changes us, opens us, transforms our awareness of self and other and what is possible. Friendships can bear the signature of grace, of the Holy, the ineffable.

I also mean to be provocative in naming friendship sacramental. I mean for us to wake up, pay attention, be alert that there’s something deeply important here. Something worthy of our attention as individuals and as a church.

Many of us remember childhood as a time of easy friendships. I watch my daughter, Grace, make friends with new children all the time – but she also has close ties with a few. I know I spent vast amounts of time with my friend Janet when I was Grace’s age. We played with dolls, we jumped rope, we drew elaborate houses on the driveway with chalk. We played superheroes together. We had dinner at each others tables, and slept over at each other’s houses. We went to camp together. We played with other kids, yes, but we shared our deepest thoughts and dreams with one another. We had an intimacy that is rare.

My colleague, the Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell, writes, “In an intimate relationship we risk being who we really are with another. We are each of us trapped within our own mind and body and consciousness, and we try to break those bounds with the crude tools we have at hand -- we try with look and language and touch, to at least partially bridge what is unbridgeable. We join our inescapable private life with another such life in the space between us, where

meaning lies. The reaching out is imperfect, we will be misunderstood at times. But besides the food we eat and the air we breathe, it is quite literally what gives us life.”

For Janet and me, the sharing between us truly did give us life. It freed us from the tyranny of our families – helped us know there was another world, another soul, with whom we could reveal ourselves at our deepest.

This may sound like pretty heady stuff for a childhood friendship, and perhaps memory has glorified it. But I do believe that children have a need every bit as deep as adults do to feel and share from their souls’ depth. And not all of us have families in which this is possible.

It is often much harder to make new friends in our adult years. It’s partly because we’re so much busier. Families take time, being a partner or spouse takes time. Work and caring for the places where we live takes time. But it also is harder because we become more set in our ways as we grow older. And we lose our willingness to play, and to risk. And unlike a child, as adults, we have property and position to defend, and perhaps more than a few secrets to hide. And so we become selective of whom we might choose to share with.

Some say that women make friends more easily than men do. Some blame men, saying that they just don’t know how to share themselves. But while men’s and women’s styles of relating are different, I think men experience a huge amount of cultural pressure that makes it difficult to make and keep deep friendships. Our culture says men don’t cry, men don’t talk about their feelings, and men shouldn’t get too close to other men. For the most part, what men are allowed to do is to drink beer and go fishing, or watch sports and punch each other on the shoulder. I would not presume to say that transformation cannot be manifested through these activities (especially because I know it can be!), but on some level, most men long for more from one another, and must fight the cultural norms to achieve it. And sometimes the effort and the fear involved is just too much.

How do we make a friend?

Sometimes the very way we meet is a moment of grace. I’ll never forget how I met my dear friend Maxine. It was many years ago, when I was young and single and signed up for a personal development seminar in Seattle. The seminar course was well-attended – a room full of hundreds of people wearing name tags – and although we had been encouraged to talk with one another outside of class and to support one another in the grueling, soul-searching work the seminar called for, there was always more of an air of competition than cooperation in the room.

One night, a woman sitting near the back stood up and called us all on our charade. “I don’t know about the rest of you,” she said in a whiny voice, “but I’m certainly not feeling very supported by anyone in this seminar.” In response, the seminar leader yelled out, “Okay, who’s willing to support Maxine?” I thought Maxine sounded awful, certainly not like anyone I’d want to support, but one of the challenges we agreed to in the seminar was to do things that were outside our comfort zone, so I raised my hand. And the next thing I knew, Maxine and I were assigned to each other.

She gave me a ride home after class that night, and we found that we had almost nothing in common. But I had made a promise to support her, and so, week after week, I called her, and we talked about the seminar. Sometimes we got together for coffee or to take a walk. And every week she gave me a ride home from class, because I didn’t have a car. And after a while it didn’t matter that we had nothing in common, we became friends anyway. And we remained friends, always caring for one another, always making the time to spend with one another. And over the years we piled up a treasure trove of shared experiences and knowledge of one another that allowed us sustain and deepen our connection even through radical changes in both our lives.

Maxine and I were friends like Pythias and Damon in the ancient story. When Pythias was accused of plotting to murder Dionysus, the King of Syracuse, the King ordered his execution, but allowed him to go home first, to make a last visit to his family, provided that he had a friend who would take his place in the executioner’s holding cell. Much to the King’s surprise, Damon agreed to take Pythias’ place, and Pythias went home.

When the day of the execution came and Pythias had not yet returned, the king had Damon prepared for execution. As he was being lead to his death, Damon was certain his friend would still return – and at the last minute, Pythias did come back, and Damon was spared. The king was so impressed with the depth of their friendship, he decided to free them both, and then asked if he, too, might become such a friend.

Over the years, my friendship with Maxine survived arguments and fights and misunderstandings. It thrived through a week-long backpacking trip, and even several ill-fated vacation road trips. I’ll never forget the night we spent on one of those trips in an old hotel near the Columbia Gorge in Washington, where the bed’s springs were so badly broken I decided to sleep on the floor – which was slanted so sharply that every time I relaxed into sleep I rolled downhill and hit the wall! The little sleep we got was haunted by nightmares, and we woke up too grumpy to speak to one another – but burst into laughter over a breakfast of the weirdest-looking pancakes I’d ever seen.

I loved Maxine, and would have given my life for hers, but ultimately when the time came, I could not. I could not take from her the burden of the cancer

that ended her life in 1999. But what I could do was to walk with her through the end of her life, and I am glad I was able to do that, though it was terribly painful. I miss her still.

Like his friend Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson also wrote about friendship. In his essay by that name, he writes, "The end of friendship is a commerce more strict than any of which we have experience. It is for aid and comfort through all the relations and passages of life and death. It is fit for serene days, and graceful gifts, and country rambles, but also for rough roads and hard fare, shipwreck, poverty, and persecution. It keeps company with the sallies of the wit and the trances of religion. We are to dignify to each other the daily needs and offices of man's life, and embellish it by courage, wisdom, and unity. It should never fall into something usual and settled, but should be alert and inventive, and add rhyme and reason to what was drudgery."

In other words, friendships are good for us. They are good for our health and for our souls. They are a good way to stay honest. They help us enjoy life's good times and to weather the bad times as well.

We need to honor our friendships, to make time in our lives for them, to nurture them.

Or do we? In a lecture titled, "The Limits of Friendship," Joseph Epstein asks some provocative questions. He writes, "Have our lives, despite all the conveniences made possible by technology, become so crowded that in our day friendships often seem as much an inconvenience as one of life's great pleasures. Is friendship, in an age when the therapeutic has triumphed, as satisfying as it once was? Has the shifted interest in family and the extreme interest in child-rearing pushed friendship to an even lower priority, something no longer quite central to our lives but something aside and apart, a thing reserved almost entirely for leisure time? Can we any longer really lose ourselves in our friends, so that they become, in the classical formulation, "other selves," for whom we are prepared to sacrifice all and everything and upon whom we can count to do the same for us?" ("The Limits of Friendship," AEI Bradley Lecture 2004)

In other words, given everything else that crowds in upon our days, is friendship really worth all the time and trouble it takes?

Next Thursday, I will fly across the country to the Seattle area, the place where my friend Janet Caswell now lives. She moved to a community only a 20 minute drive from where I used to live in Bremerton, Washington, about two years before I moved away from there to come here. She had other reasons for moving there besides my presence, of course, but I know that my being there helped her feel at home.

You see, Janet and I have never lost touch over the forty years between 1966 and today. She has been, if not always my closest friend, certainly my most constant one. We hung around together in one way or another all through our elementary, middle, and high school years, and though we went off to different universities and vastly different life paths afterwards, we have always shared the vagaries and victories of our lives with one another through letters and phone calls and an occasional visit, and of course, by e-mail. My friendship with her affirms for me the continuity of life, and has always served to remind me of the little girl I once was, and to not lose touch with that little girl.

I'm flying out to Seattle next week, though, not simply to visit Janet. On Saturday, I am going to marry Janet! That is, of course, I'm going to officiate as the minister at her wedding. It's been almost one of those woo-woo kinds of experiences. Not long after she moved to Washington, I had a dream that I was officiating at her wedding. When she told me she'd met someone, I knew he was the one. And then, on the day last year that he proposed to her, hours before he did, I sent her an e-mail message with one line that asked, "engaged yet?" I just knew.

"...Friendship is a necessity," writes theologian Thomas Moore, and I agree. "If we neglect it," he continues, "we will feel its lack as a morbidity of soul." (SoulMates, p. 93) Throughout our lives, friends help us in the process of developing emotionally and spiritually. In friendship, we allow the sacred and vulnerable part of ourselves to be seen and touched by another – who also allows us to touch them. In friendship there is a mutuality of giving and receiving that we freely choose. And it is in this choosing, this risking, in this mutuality, this intimacy that can lead to ultimacy, that the sacrament of friendship resides.

Friendship waits behind a million faces everyday. Emerson wrote, "How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom, though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with!" This church is a gold mine of opportunities for friendship – in small groups, UUnity Circles, classes, committees, and so many other ways -- if we will but look around, and take the time to listen to one another.

Here in this community we can teach ourselves and each other to reach out -- to give, and to reach out and receive; to do the daily caring and maintenance work of which friendships are made. Here we can learn to forgive, and to accept forgiveness, and to companion one another through all of the hills and valleys of life.

My hope is that this church is a place where the sacrament of friendship is taken seriously, a place where it can be taught and learned by all of us, for all of us. A place where the power of hundreds of friendships come together, and where the love and compassion and joy and understanding they generate become an energy to fuel all of our hearts and souls as we work to help make our world a better place.

For it is never for self alone that we do this work of reaching out, of risking; this sacramental connecting. Always we know that we are here for a purpose larger than self – that we are individuals held and connected with and responsible to a greater wholeness that is always being created, co-created, by us, through us, in partnership with the Universe.

May it ever be so. Amen.