



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

God And The New Science Of Friendship
“God’s Facebook Page”

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
May 17, 2009

In this morning’s gospel lesson, Jesus tells us that friendship is intrinsically sacred and sacramental. “I no longer call you servants. I now call you friends.” (John 15:15)

Last month I was delighted by an article in the science section of *The New York Times* entitled, “What Are Friends For? A Longer Life.” (TARA PARKER-POPE, “What Are Friends For? A Longer Life,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2009) The article’s thesis is that science is now showing that people have a powerful weapon to help fight illness and depression, speed recovery, slow the aging process and prolong life: that weapon is our friendships.

“Researchers are only now starting to pay attention to the importance of friendships and social networks in overall health. A [10-year Australian study](#) found that older people with a larger circle of friends were during that ten-year study 22 percent less likely to die than those with fewer friends. And last year, [Harvard researchers reported](#) that strong social ties could promote brain health as we age. People with strong friendships are less likely than others to get colds, perhaps because they have lower stress levels because of their network of friends.”

The part of the article that really got my attention and which I share with you as friends is this.

“Last year, researchers studied 34 students at the University of Virginia, taking them to the base of a steep hill and fitting them with a weighted backpack. Then each student was asked to estimate the steepness of the hill before them. During the research period some participants stood next to friends, while others stood alone.” And the focus of the research for those who were being studied was how steep each person estimates the hill before them to be. The results were this: “The students who stood with friends gave lower estimates of the steepness of the hill [than those who stood alone]. And the longer the friends had known each other, the less steep the hill before them appeared.”

How many times in your life has the very existence of friends made the challenges of life less daunting simply because of the encouragement, presence, and cooperation of one’s network of friends? I remember when a parishioner in this parish was diagnosed with cancer she said the first thing she decided to do was to tell – she wrote an explanatory email and sent it to all of her friends.

The article in the *New York Times* concludes, “People with stronger friendship networks feel like there is someone they can turn to,” this is a quote from the Director of the Center for

Gerontology at Virginia Tech. She said, “Friendship is an undervalued resource. The consistent message of these studies is that friends make your life better.”

That article rang true to my depths. I think every American and many Christians have a battle going on within each one of us around the interplay of individualism and community. The ethos of the importance of each individual is one of America’s core cultural values.

All of the sociologist Robert Bellah’s work showed that “we are probably the most individualistic culture in human history in America. There is much that is good about individualism: the value it gives to individual lives, and places on individual lives, the importance of individual rights, individual choice and opportunity. Individualism emphasizes freedom, and freedom is one of the gifts of God.” (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 128) Our country is founded on the value that every human being is created equal and that in everyone are certain inalienable rights – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

So much of what you and I fight for in this church as followers of Jesus is rooted in the very important value of individualism – the precious nature of every human being, beloved by God, symbolized in Jesus’ metaphor of every hair of every person’s head is counted by God. (Matthew 10:30) We sing, *God’s eye is on the sparrow and I know God watches me.* We often quote Gandhi about the democracy of souls. In our baptismal covenant we speak of the right of every human being to dignity and respect. The Bible speaks of the right of every human being to sit under his or her own fig tree (Micah 4:4; one of the biblical images of the importance of economic justice). We are prayerfully pro-choice here lifting the freedom of individual choice. And all of our human rights work is rooted in the right for every person to have freedom from oppression. I never want to do away with that understanding of the important value of individualism.

Individualism as a core value can also obscure the sacred truth that the science of friendship is showing us – “the enormous effect of social systems on the lives of people.” (Borg, p. 128f) Repeatedly, we proclaim here at All Saints what we have learned from the pulpit from Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his own embodiment of Ubuntu, the ancient African value of community which says, “You cannot be a human being alone. I am because we are.”

Ultimately, there is no truth to the notion of a “self-made person” – “that we are primarily the product of our own initiative and hard work”. Too often that has been the only interpretation of both Christianity and of how to make it in the world. This leads to a focus on rewards for individual “success” – success either because I have defined the faith as believing the right kind of beliefs which is misnamed “orthodoxy” or in the economic realm, because I have attained certain economic accomplishments as an individual. The destructive and unethical impact of taking individualism to this extreme is the belief that “well, individuals get what they deserve” and that is antithetical to a system of justice and peace. The quality of our lives is the result of how responsibly we make use of our opportunities.” The reality is that “We are also the product of many factors beyond our control.” (Borg, p. 128f)

Jesus says this morning, “I no longer call you servants, I call you friends, because I have revealed to you everything that God has told me about sacred and holy behavior.” Let me illustrate what I think God wants in making all of us God’s friends. And what God wants us to do as God’s friends.

This is a story told by a physician, Dr. David C. Leach. He says, “Pretend her name was Mary Jones. She had been put into the hospital because of her cocaine addiction, AIDS, and osteomyelitis; and the nurses wanted her out of that hospital because when last seen she had soiled herself into her own hand and then thrown the human waste in the face of the nurse, and shouted: “Now you’ll get AIDS, too.”

Dr. Leach said he wanted to see her. He went into Mary Jones’s room and said, “Hello, I’m Doctor Leach and I’m looking for Mary Jones.” Her eyes were both fierce and shamed as she snarled, “I’m Mary Jones.”

Dr. Leach replied, “I don’t think you are. I have heard that Mary Jones is very sensitive and actually quite nice. I’m looking for her – have you seen her?”

At that moment the patient began to cry. Dr. Leach said he extended his hand and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Jones. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you at first.” The next morning Mary Jones had cleaned up her room and herself; she completed the six-week course of treatment and became everyone’s favorite patient. (David C. Leach, M.D. *Leading From Within*, p. 94)

Jesus says in this morning’s gospel, “I no longer call you servants, I call you friends.” This ancient and radical saying – that The Divine looks to you and me as friends – has been one of the places in scripture that has helped us understand that God is the God of compassion, forgiveness, love, and inclusion – the God of friendship. God is not the God that is punitive and angry whose rage and wrath must somehow be appeased by the sacrifice of Jesus. That is not the religion of Jesus. That is not the central tenet of Christianity. Compassion is the central tenet of Christianity.

In our nation we are squarely in the midst of an important and appropriate national debate about President Obama’s reversing his earlier thinking about releasing photos of torture, carrying forward the military commissions formed by President Bush for trying people arrested because they were suspected of terrorism, too often on the basis of nothing but racial profiling. I happen to think that President Barack Obama is wrong and that we have a responsibility to support his getting back on track of compassion and friendship for all. The national debate extends to whether or not to have a form of truth and reconciliation inquiry into the truth behind the practice of torture. This morning’s gospel lesson would have us ask, in addition to what is moral, to what degree can a country say it believes that all people are created equal and that each person bears the image of God and still advocate torture or cover over practices that were degrading to other people?

This morning’s lessons suggest that all behavior – not just the behavior of individuals but the behavior of nations as well must be measured in terms of whether or not we make friends throughout the world for the values of God – the values of justice, the values of inclusion, and the values of peace. All our foreign and domestic policies must be measured against the plumb line of making friends for God’s values. We must all look beyond what other people are throwing at us and reach into the belovedness of even the most unpleasant adversary and develop policies and behavior that at the least do not make more enemies and that at the most make more friends.

The radical notion of healthy religion, the religion of Jesus, is that you and I cannot comprehend the vast universality of God's network of friends. It is beyond our comprehension. In the first reading this morning, the religious people were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on non religious people, too (Acts 10:45). Christians are often surprised to learn that Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Atheists, Agnostics, are also God's friends. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit is this gift of relating to people in ways that we in turn make friends for God. This morning's collect prays that "we may come to love you in all things and in all people." It notes that "God has prepared such good things as surpass our understanding and that God's promises exceed all that we can desire." That means turning the entire human race into the human family.

I've been reflecting on friendship ever since I joined facebook. [laughter] Now, you don't have to be on facebook to be saved. For those of you who are not on facebook let me tell you quickly how it works. You just Google "facebook," you go to the facebook website, you join, put in your name and later you may put in a photograph, and then you just go up to the facebook search engine and you type in a friend. Let's say, "Abel Lopez." Then it will take you to Abel's facebook page and then you apply to be Abel's friend. And then facebook taps Abel on the shoulder the next time he is on his email and it says, "Ed Bacon wants to be your friend." And Abel has a choice [laughter] whether or not to make me his friend. If he does, interestingly enough, I'm saying this after the day we had confirmation yesterday, he presses the word, "confirm." Then all of a sudden I see all of these friends that Abel has. Look, Abel allowed Susan Russell to be his friend! and James Walker to be his friend! and Zelda Kennedy to be his friend! and a whole bunch of people who are not my friends. And I began to invite more and more people to be my friend.

Think about God's facebook page. [laughter] Think about the fact that God has asked everybody in this room and everybody on the globe to be God's friend. Think about going and discovering all those friends God has. People who are not like me, people with whom I don't agree, people against whom my country has gone to war, people my country has tortured, people against whom my country has discriminated, people my church has not allowed to be ordained because of their gender or their sexual orientation. The number of friends on God's facebook page surpasses my understanding.

The night before last my wife and I came to an event here with Vestry member, Will Watts because All Saints was a co-sponsor of the reception given by a man who has moved to this country who was disabled on June 4, 1989, in Tiananmen Square. You will remember that thousands and thousands of protesters had come to that square to call for democracy in China. The tanks had come in and rolled over hundreds of them. Thousands of others were through negotiation allowed to leave in peace. This one man, Fang Zheng stayed to protect a young woman whom he had promised he would not let anything happen to her. He rushed her over to the edge of the square and there was a boundary there. a partition between the square and a bicycle path. Just at the last minute he hoisted her over the partition to safety and just as that happened on his blind side behind him there came a tank and rolled over his feet. He was an Olympic athlete and now he lives life of a double amputee in a wheelchair. Every time he has applied to be a participant in the Special Olympics in China a form asks "Nature of your handicap?" He courageously and consistently writes "Tanks rolled over my feet 6/4/89 in Tiananmen Square." And the nation of China has never allowed him to compete because he tells the truth.

So now his friends, his Chinese-American friends in Los Angeles and San Francisco have brought him to this country hoping that he can resume his career of being a world athlete. Prior to his speaking here at All Saints there was a performance by a little five-year old boy and an eight-year old sister playing violin concerto duets while two other little girls twirled, dancing in front of us, performing before the speaker told his story. After every concerto we would applaud. And then after our applause died down we heard other applause from upstairs. Those of you who have been in our social hall, Sweetland Hall, know that it is acoustically very challenging. Up in the Senior High Room, one can hear what's going on downstairs and vice versa. Upstairs there was a group meeting and from time to time they would be applauding and so there was applauding both upstairs and downstairs. Then our speaker came and told his story about Tiananmen Square and we would applaud him from time to time and there was applause upstairs from time to time. I was caught up with the applause from both meetings and I began to ask myself what was going on. "What is the meaning of applause in the human community? What I concluded about at least the applause of that night is that the meaning of applause is encouragement. The meaning of applause is our standing together at the base of steep hills and because we are friends with one another, the steepness of the hill is not so daunting. Then I remembered that the group upstairs was a twelve-step recovery group applauding someone who had made a stride in one more week of recovery from addiction. And we were applauding children performing a daunting violin concerto. And we were applauding a new friend who has come to a foreign country minus his legs to compete as a world athlete.

Isn't that what we are called to do in God's friendship? To applaud one another as each of us struggles to flourish to be what God called us to be?

We now come to this table for the purpose of hearing again that God has called us to the sacred status – to be God's friends. And God sends us out to make friends. Come now to this table and push that button named "Confirm."

Amen.