

Sermon for Sunday, May 13, 2012 John 15: 9-17 "Friends in Low Places"

Have you ever had a relationship with someone that changed in the course of your knowing each other? A time when the defined pattern of how you interacted with that person turned into something very different, in a way you might not have expected?

It's not uncommon. For me, I can recall several bosses who were first mentors, then colleagues, and eventually became friends. There was a shift in the relationship. Sometimes it was context: I was promoted to the same level as that boss, and it was natural that things changed. Sometimes it was a moment of being in the trenches together, struggling through a difficult problem, appreciating each other's gifts. I can also recall professors from seminary with whom my relationship changed once I graduated. The artifice of teacher and student was no longer necessary. We could appreciate each other in new ways, because the context in which we related to one another had changed. We were no longer professor and student. We were simply friends. I had no doubt that these professors were still much more knowledgeable than I was, but the pivot point of the relationship was no longer my studying with them. They now were my friends. The context of our relationship changed, and so the relationship itself changed.

Think, for a minute of Matthew Crawley, the middle-class cousin of the aristocratic Crawleys of Downton Abbey. When we first meet him, he is a working attorney, tending to his own needs. When it becomes apparent that there will be no male heir to inherit Downton Abbey, Matthew is told that he must come and be the one who manages to keep the estate in the family. He has to adjust to life as an aristocrat, with servants assisting him in dressing and such, a life he finds ridiculous. But he gets used to it, and when he goes off to war, William, one of the servants on the estate who has enlisted, is detailed to serve as his valet. The pre-Downton Abbey Matthew would have found it absurd, but he falls into this odd relationship of lord and servant in uniform rather quickly. Context matters. He has grown used to seeing William as his servant, but the relationship shifts once again in the midst of the fighting...earldoms mean little in foxholes, it seems. When Matthew and William are trapped in a firefight, they struggle as equals once again. And when William is mortally wounded attempting to save Matthew in the battle, it is clear that Matthew does not see him as an expendable servant, but he grieves him as an equal comrade-in-arms. The shifting context affects the shift in their relationship.

Now think of Jesus in today's gospel. What has the context of his relationship the disciples been over the three years of his active ministry? Very simple: he is the Lord, they are the disciples, also named as servants. In fact, if you look at the Greek text of this passage, Jesus refers to them not as servants, but as *doulos* slaves. That's a pretty radical difference in status, isn't it? But no sooner does he describe them as slaves, he says that something has changed. They are no longer slaves to him. They are *philos*...friends. Talk about a promotion!

The disciples probably wondered what was going on here. This was before Jesus' arrest, crucifixion and death. What he said to them sounds to us like a sort of last will and testament, final instructions before he leaves them. But all they knew in that moment was that there was a shift in their relationship. They were no longer subordinates. They were on an equal footing with Jesus, as his friends. His words about dying for each other had little meaning beyond an expression of love, since they didn't know that shortly Jesus would do exactly that. The full revealing of the context was yet to come.

But love and friendship are things they cherished, and they are things that we cherish, too. Those people who are enduring friends in our lives are our anchors and our sails. Our lives become entwined with theirs and we are changed by their presence.

So, too, Jesus's presence in the disciples' lives and in ours. We know a bit more about the whole story than the disciples did in today's Gospel. We know that Jesus did lay down his life for us, being willing to be a slave to suffering and death so that we might live. And we also know that his very presence among us was yet another kind of gift of love and friendship, a divine gift of divine love and holy friendship.

His presence among us is in fact the proof of divine love. We human beings have made it apparent that we cannot understand who our creator is, so Jesus comes to earth to make it easier for us to understand the Creator's boundless love. Jesus comes to earth so that our relationship with our God is strengthened.

That's what St Augustine was talking about when, almost two millenia ago, he wrote these words: "Deus est qui Deum dat." God gives us many gifts, but God is He who gives God¹. Sounds a bit strange, that phrase, until you think of it as Jesus does in the gospel: God has given us Jesus, a human as well as divine, so that we can be in relationship - in love - in friendship with God. We cannot love God without the gift of Jesus to help us understand God, and what relationship with God means. Friendship seems a word both too small and too large to contain such a loving relationship.

What the disciples did not completely understand when Jesus said "I call you my friends" was how radical that shift in context and relationship was. We only begin to understand it. This man among us, teaching us, weeping with us, laughing and eating with us, dying for us, is God. God shaped in a way that we can understand, to be sure, but fully and magnificently God. It is perfectly reasonable that we should be his servants. He is God and we are not. But Jesus says, "Of course I am God. But that doesn't mean that we cannot love each other with the same intimacy, the same tenderness, the same joy as friends. And, oh, by the way, love each other the same way that you and I love each other."

Even as he is laying out his end-of-life instructions to the disciples, he is continuing to be their friend by modeling what filial love is. This Holy One is the God who has given us himself in human form so that we might better relate to Him. That makes the guidance to love each other as he loves them even more striking...we are to love each other as God loves us. Impossible? Perhaps, but we are asked to try our best to do that.

Friends come in surprising ways, in unorthodox places. They may come to us in an Abbey or in a foxhole or on the train or in the hospital. They may even – Don't be shocked – come to us in church. Can we welcome our friends as Jesus did, loving no matter what? Can we share the gift of that love with those sometimes unlikely friends, in sometimes difficult circumstances?

How can we not?

Amen.

¹ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, XV.26.46