

Todd. Chauntel. Rainer. Jenny. Andy. Huong. Shawn. Alexei. Xin. Professor Pennings. What would life be without friends? Cindy. Clydon. Mindy. Scott. Phil. Professor Ottati. I wonder who comes to mind for you, who've shaped who you are. Lawrence and Allison. Neil and Chrissie. Neil and Barbara. That sample takes me up through life in Scotland. If we'd chat, I wonder who we might name and how we'd characterize good friendship. True closeness and companionship. You may notice I often call you friends. Yes, it's being nice, warm-fuzzy. And in living faith it's much more.

I've long been touched and inspired by Jesus' simple common affection as he says farewell. No longer servants or even disciples. No more hierarchy. No one better, more important than another. I call you friends, Jesus says, because the same Divine Love in me flows through you. For Jesus, that's the definition of friendship. Sure, often we have common interests, experiences, beliefs, goals. Not always. Yes, there'll be goodness, fun, kindred personalities. And inevitably culture categorizes difference—wealth, race, gender identity, religion. There'll be disagreements, even frustration and anger. Topics we don't discuss. Opposing ballots we cast. Former friends grow distant, lost. Lasting friends prove more than just people who look, think, act like us. We flourish abundantly when amid God-given variation, we face difference, we feel tension, and we find creative ways to build together on what's best, lovingly possible. For Jesus that's grace, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, sacrifice embodying Holy Love. It fills us and radiates through us with joy. You

make my joy complete. My life gets fulfilled with you. And no one, he declares, has greater love than this – to give one’s very life for one’s friends.

Often in scripture and church we talk about being family in Christ. And we hear it in other human connections—business family, sports team family. We value and want to care for one another beyond commoditized calculation. That’s a positive impulse, a good spirit. And when true closeness reigns in families of name / blood / adoption, it’s crucial for personal growth, beneficial to society. Still, friends, we know no family is perfect. Some sibling or even parent relationships for whatever reason get hard. For some people home is far more abusive than abundant and gets abandoned. Surely Jesus saw it, too. So it’s striking that his standard of faithful Holy Love, his expectation for life-as-friends requires *intention*. In and beyond being born into a certain place, people, situation, fullness of life as God wants it to be grows from commitment, effort – whether among family, strangers or friends that become the family we choose.

And you know, we’re talking about more than clicking “like” or accepting a request on Facebook, right. Those connections can be meaningful, of course, as surely some for whom we’ve clicked are ones with whom we’ve also clicked much more deeply and stayed connected. Be they in Cincinnati, Louisville, New York, Denver, Atlanta, Miami, another country, or Kalamazoo.

Seems to me friends are people with whom we change and grow in reciprocal cycles of giving and receiving. We complement not duplicate one another. Friends, broaden the expanse of who we are, what we know, believe, love—the scope of grace in our lives. (It’s like Chrissy’s magic trick!) In deeply-centered peace, we feel no need to prove anything. Rather open enough to be vulnerable, trusting enough to reveal imperfections beautiful idiosyncrasies, and honest enough to share frailties, fears and anxieties. In this Spirit, maybe we’ve heard it said and have found

it true that after long being apart, with little or no contact—months or years—true friends can pick up again right where they left off. That’s what Jesus offered as people met him on their journeys walking, talking, eating together. And in the power of resurrection, that’s what he still offers us. “What a friend we have in Jesus ...” And for him, you see, this spirit of friendship opening, spreading ever further is a very manifestation of the reign of God in our world. Beyond personal intimacy it can shape all society.

That’s what Pope Francis tries to inspire in his book *Fratelli Tutti*. He begins with a story of how St. Francis of Assisi travelled to Egypt during the Crusades to befriend Sultan Malik-el-Kamil. By that example, Francis keeps repeating the idea that friends go beyond drawing others into their personal lives, to help others become more fully who they are. This kind of love, he writes, is more than just benevolent actions. It’s a kind of union that arises from considering others as valuable, worthy, beautiful as they are – our love seeking the best for their lives. “Only by cultivating this way of relating to one another will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one ... open to all.” We must create processes of encounter that help people accept difference and enable the right to be themselves. This foundation for full life together in joy and peace, transcends power and transforms any descent into fearful violence.¹

So here’s a simplistic sum of the good news today. What a friend we have in Jesus. Yes, and now our risen Lord sends us to be and become friends with others. That’s how the earliest followers of Jesus spread the good news and seeded the church. Disciples, become friends and apostles like Philip, went to encounter and include people beyond the bounds of their original Jewish faith. As our next story begins, Philip had already journeyed from Jerusalem to Samaria. Hear again what the Spirit may say in this reading from Acts 8.

What warms my heart with gratitude and contented joy about as much as anything else is hearing you talk about friendships forged at church. On journeys of our own coming to meet people we'd have never known who enrich life, bring comfort, goodness, shared meaning and purpose, often especially amid difficulty and loss. Gifts of humor, generosity, perspective and simple companionship that grace our lives. And likewise, it saddens me when friends leave for whatever reason, usually good, sometimes not so. Friendship pulses at the heart of what's good in our living faith. A loving source of comfort, hope, witness to resurrection as we sense these bonds endure beyond death, beyond a move, beyond an end in an argument. A voice on the phone calling from Petoskey to simply share he's in recovery, with a job, a new start, feeling good. A face in the pews again after a long time, having to work on Sundays, just drifting away, or pandemic isolating.

Maybe it's too much to say Philip and the Eunuch became fast friends. Still, this story shows what makes for good friendship as Jesus would call it. Growth through conversational exchange. Philip may have offered scriptural insight, but it's the Ethiopian's questions that spark interpretation. Do you understand? How can I with no one to help guide me. sit beside me. Openness, longing, vulnerability, humility that enables us to stretch beyond limits, confinements, barriers and biases. The Ethiopian was a faithful person, yet deemed outcast—black, a eunuch—not good enough by religious rules. Isn't that often how the best friendships get forged—outsiders loving one another. Making friends doesn't necessitate labeling others as enemies. You see, here's a key to getting the good news Luke's trying to tell us. Philip was saved, redeemed, transformed as much as the Ethiopian. And so, the holy conversation continues over all generations.

You see, friends, life and living faith is a shared experience. It's far more community than individual accomplishment. We all need companions to be most

fully who God created us to be. And each in our way we share a sacred call to join the journey with someone else with hope, hesitation, wonder, joy, yearning questions.

I love how Richard Rohr describes this “radical grace.” Utterly free and gratuitous love that validates and transforms. We let God and trusted others see the real us, not an ideal we wish for. And once we receive that experience—being truly seen, accepted, cared for—then we naturally become a conduit of the same for others. In that spirit, Rohr invited a few friends to share his daily blog, adding to the conversation. Dana Roberts stresses that being friends with Jesus means carrying responsibilities for relationship that he embodied—mutuality, intimacy, far beyond personal needs. It’s hard work to walk as partners with Jesus in this way. For he leads us in directions we might rather not go, into neighborhoods we might avoid, meeting friends we’d otherwise never know.ⁱⁱ

Another friend of Rohr’s, Brian McLaren tells about praying in church just after 9/11. He felt a voice, as it were, in his chest. “Your Muslim neighbors are in danger of reprisals. You must try to protect them.” So he wrote letters to Muslim communities nearby and drove to deliver them. At one mosque, he introduced himself clumsily and stood awkwardly as the imam read the letter. The man looked down to read, then up and down again—each time his eyes more moist. Suddenly he threw his arms around me, McLaren says, squeezing his head into my chest. No hostility or even suspicion, rather the open heart of a friend.

It’s one thing to say we love humanity in general, McLaren concludes. It’s quite another to learn to love this or that specific neighbor. Invite them into companionship over a cup of tea or coffee. Ask questions. Display unexpected interest in them, their traditions, their beliefs, and their stories. Enter their world,

and welcome them into your world, without judgment. Experience conviviality. Join the conspiracy of plotting for the common good together.ⁱⁱⁱ

Dear beloved in Christ, wouldn't the world be a better place if neighbors, politicians, religions, even sometimes families treated one another more like friends. I wonder where the spirit may lead us like Philip or Philippa for our time as we get in the chariot to sit where someone else sits, continuing the conversation, exchanging food or books, sharing a journey to a distant land or simply offering a helping hand, a listening ear amid joys and sorrows and conundrums and longings we share.

I wonder who might come to mind for us, who's touched us in some way and shaped who we've grown to be today. What special moments or experiences beyond nice, warm-fuzzy true, honest, open, humble, generous loving companionship where life was given and we received. And I expect Jesus might wonder who just might consider us, name us such a friend.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2020), 4, 93, 217-219.

ⁱⁱ Dana Roberts on Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, April 14th 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian McLaren on Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, April 15th 2021.