

ANYWAY, IT'S ABOUT OLD FRIENDS

John 15:12-17

Sermon presented by The Rev. Dr. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church, Huntington, New York, on December 31, 2006

In the movie *When Harry Met Sally* the main characters, Harry Burns and Sally Albright, played by Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan, each thinking the other has fallen out of love, run into each other outside the Waldorf on New Year's Eve. Only in the movies does this happen! Swept up in the romance of the moment they apologize and re-affirm their love. As they kiss, the hour of midnight approaches. The seconds count down. 5-4-3-2-1. Happy New Year! At once peoples' happy singing from the grand ballroom is heard. It's *Auld Lang Syne*, of course.

Harry attempts to describe the meaning of the song.

What does this song mean? My whole life, I don't know what this song means. I mean, "Should old acquaintance be forgot"? Does that mean that we should forget old acquaintances, or does it mean if we happened to forget them, we should remember them, which is not possible because we already forgot?

Sally says:

Well, maybe it means that we should remember that we forgot them or something. Anyway, it's about old friends.

New Years Eve is an occasion many are likely to spend with friends rather than family. Whereas winter's other holidays, Thanksgiving and Christmas, are about family, New Year's Eve is commonly about friends. Maybe there's something about the passing of another year that reminds us of how precious and vulnerable friendships are, and may call to mind those who once were in our lives but are no more. Some friendships end because of hurtful things said or done, unkindnesses and betrayals. Others die away due to the natural cycle of things; people simply move in different directions. And friendships may also weaken due to neglect or indifference.

I was at the Music City Bowl football game in Nashville on Thursday, between Kentucky and Clemson. Sitting nearby were a couple guys, obviously buddies, one dressed all in Kentucky blue, the other in Clemson orange. Throughout the game they were teasing back-and-forth – taunting, boasting, poking fun. "You guys don't let the game get in the way of being friends," I joked. "It 's not easy," the Kentucky guy said. And the Clemson guy, who obviously had already given some thought to this matter, because he'd been drinking way too much to be this clever this quick, said: "Well, I'll tell you how it works. He's good at being a fool, and I'm good at suffering fools gladly." That made sense to me. I've been on both sides of that friendship formula.

Friendships come, friendships go. These realities have always been present. There's nothing new about the ebb-and-flow of friendships. And yet, there is something new in the air, new and troubling. Dr. Lynn Smith-Lovin, sociologist at Duke University, has researched the changing nature of friendship, and based on her research has authored a report titled "Social

Isolation in America,” which appeared in the June issue of the *American Sociological Review*. She found that one-fourth of all Americans report that they “have nobody to talk to about important matters,” and compared to a similar study done 20 years ago, in only two decades, from 1985 to 2004, the number of people who say they have “no one to talk to “ has doubled. The number of “confidants” the average American claims to have has gone down from three to two, and 25% say they have, at most, one. Her research confirms findings of other studies, among them: fewer people to turn to for help, fewer watchdogs to deter neighborhood crime, fewer visitors to hospitals and nursing homes, and fewer participants in community groups. “There has been a great loss in friends who will provide help, support, advice and connections to a wider world,” Smith-Lovin writes. She calls this sharp decline startling. “You don’t usually expect major features of social life to change very much from t-year-to-year, or even from decade-to-decade.” But, she concludes: in this era of competing demands on time and energy, friendship has been “knocked-off the balancing beam of life.” Or, as a commentator suggests, Smith-Lovin’s report titled “Social Isolation in America” might better be called, more bluntly, “Friendless in America.”

Less scientific, but as much to the point, or perhaps even more to the point, is what’s been called the “three o’clock in the morning friend.” That’s someone you can call at three o’clock in the morning, because your life is falling apart, or, less dramatically, because you’re lonely or anxious or fearful or sad, and it’s okay. Do you have a three o’clock in the morning friend?

What does scripture have to say about friends and friendship? Today I’d like to consider New Testament examples of friendship-in-action. There’s systematic theology of friendship in scripture, as such, or single Bible verse that sums it all up. Rather, there are examples which reveal various aspects of friendship, and from which we may stake-out some ideas. I invite you to look at these examples with me, that we may learn a thing or two along the way about the forces that attract and bind friends to each other, forces given and authorized by Jesus Christ. For Jesus said to his disciples: “You are my friends.” So many of Jesus’ teachings are about servanthood, that we may come to think of this as the basic model of our relationship with Jesus Christ: He is the master, we are servants. There is much wisdom and courage to be gained from this servant-model, of course. But there’s also this to keep in mind: At the end Jesus said, “I no longer call you servants . . . Instead, I have called you friends.” Yes, the life of faith is about acting servants. But it’s also about acting as friends – friends of Jesus, and friends with others. Holding-up his own supreme act of friendship as the representation for all, Jesus said: “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for a friend.”

Here are seven New Testament glimpses of friendship.

First: there’s the story of four men who bring a paralytic friend to Jesus (Mark 2:1-12). They carry him on a pallet to the place where Jesus is staying. Unable to squeeze their way into the crowded house, they haul him up onto the roof – (one can only imagine the complicated awkwardness of this!) – then they make an opening in the roof above Jesus, and after digging through it, they lower the mat the paralyzed friend is lying on. From this we may see one aspect of Biblical friendship: it has something to do with setting-aside other demands and duties of the day, in order to exert oneself vigorously and creatively on behalf of the other.

Second: there are stories about Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jesus' friends, to whose home in Bethany Jesus retreated and where he stayed from time-to-time, including the night of Palm Sunday, after his entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:17). . From this we may see other aspects of friendship: that it has to do with hospitality, and with being present for a person at moments of stress and struggle.

Third: there's the story of Jesus at the wedding feast of a family friend in Cana (John 2:1-11). Friendship is about celebration!

Fourth: there's the friendship of Paul and Barnabas, who worked, traveled, suffered and sacrificed side-by side, who had a serious argument about the direction of the church, a dispute that actually caused them to part (Acts 15), but who came together again (I Cor. 9:6). From this we may see that friendship is about shared commitments to shared purposes, honest disagreements and reconciliation.

Fifth: there are the friends of Tabitha, variously called Dorcas (Acts 9:36-43), who kept faithful vigil by her bedside, where she lie as one dead, as they waited for Peter to arrive at her house in Joppa, with his healing, life-restoring touch. From this we may see that friendship means knowing that there are times when there's nothing you can do, but to stay close-by and to wait, just to be there, and somehow that is enough.

Sixth: there's Silas, whom Peter says helped him in writing his letters to the young churches (I Peter 5:12). We don't know exactly how Silas helped his friend Peter, whether by writing while Peter dictated, or by translating Peter's work from Hebrew into Greek, or by arranging for the letters to be distributed. But, whatever the specifics, we may see that friendship has to do with offering and providing assistance.

Seventh: there's Cornelius, who upon coming to know Jesus Christ as Lord, immediately "called together his close friends" (Acts 10:24), and declared Good News to them. The greatest character of friendship imaginable is to turn a friend away from falsehood, and to present Jesus Christ in a winsome way.

So there we have it, some Biblical ideas about the character and contours of friendship; so that, when we read Jesus' statement "I call you friends," we may know what he has in mind, concerning how we relate to him and how we relate to one another.

Toward the end of the last tennis season Kim Clijsters announced her plans to retire after 2007. I don't follow tennis closely enough to know whether this is a reliable statement or not. Maybe she was just having a tough time, and spoke out of frustration, as performers sometimes do. But she offered a remarkably discerning reason. She said:

Tennis is important to me, but it's not the most important thing.

At the end of the day, trophies don't talk to you. They don't care

if you're happy or not. It's important to have your friends with you.

It is, indeed!

Helen Keller, blind and deaf since early childhood, became an author, lecturer and activist, so renowned and respected that at century's end TIME Magazine included her on their list of the 100 Greatest Heroes of the 20th Century. Helen Keller once offered this reflection on her life, and upon the character of life:

It has been said that my life has treated me harshly; and sometimes I have complained in my heart because so many pleasures of human experience have been withheld from me, but when I recollect the treasure of friendship that has been bestowed upon me, I withdraw all charges against life. If much has been denied me, much, very much has been given me. So long as the memory of certain beloved friends lives in my heart, I shall say that life is good.

Helen Keller's reflection is echoed in Sally Albright's, from the movie: it's about old friends. And this idea draws upon the deepest and most sublime teachings of Jesus Christ: that he does not consider us followers, adherents, advocates, believers or even servants. He calls us friends. Good Christian friends, rejoice. Yes, good Christian friends – rejoice!