

God's Ultimate Friendship

Luke 19:28-40, 22:14-21, 23:13-21; Philippians 2:5-11

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O Christ the master carpenter who, at the last, through wood and nails, purchased our whole salvation, wield well your tools in the workshop of your world so that we who come as rough wood to your bench may here be made to a truer beauty by your hands.¹ Amen.

Today we are drawn here to present ourselves as reverent, spellbound participants in an eerie yet action-packed divine/human Holy Week drama about friendship, indeed, ultimate friendship—the final prevailing friendship of God.²

God's own life-giving/life-saving Holy Week actions and purpose-filled involvements take place in Day One's mysterious fetching of "a colt that has never been ridden" with admirers spreading their cloaks both on the colt and on the road where Jesus rides the colt, where loud voices proclaim, "Blessed is the king," followed by in-between dramas including the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the betrayals of disciples Peter and Judas, followed by the loud voices of Day Five proclaiming "Crucify, crucify him!" on what we now refer to as Good Friday.

During these intense and dramatic days, we are asked to peer into an incredibly revealing mirror of personal judgment and, as Jill Duffield reminds us, to "immerse ourselves in the pervasive hurt of humanity" that Christ our preeminent Friend takes upon himself for the sake of the entire world.³ Were you there when they crucified Jesus? I believe I was. Yes, deep in my heart, I believe that Gerald O'Collins, a Jesuit priest, speaks my own regrets and fears with these haunting, hurting words about my own cowardice, indifference, and prejudice:

We are all spiritually inter-connected with Pilate, Caiaphas, and Judas. These... played out a psychodrama in which we can recognize our archetypal sins of greed, pride, and self-concern. We have no in-built guarantee that we could not be as ruthless, treacherous, and brutal. Given their chance, even our laziness and cowardice could produce as much evil as the greedy force and cunning of others....

We share in the irrational evil of those who killed Jesus.... Their... identities are no more than a thin veil through which [our] mysterious passion for evil is plainly visible. They represent us in our moral indifference, as much as Jesus represents us for our ultimate good.⁴

No, the animals and dregs of society did not put Jesus on the cross. Good people, respecters and upholders of law and order, put him there. Yes, as Reinhold Niebuhr was wont to say, we, all of us, have our intricate, self-deceiving ways by which we participate in the very sins that we abhor and preach against. And yes, this complex human intertwining of our better angels with our lesser angels caused the genius Pascal to muse that "the world is divided between saints who know themselves to be

sinner and sinner who imagine themselves to be saints.”⁵

Yet it is precisely in the midst of this tragic/ironic picture, regarding the bleak and descending possibilities of our hopeful personhood here on earth, that we receive God’s unimaginable gift of the strangest, most empowering friendship this world has ever known. Jesus “died on a cross,” says Stanley Hauerwas, “to reveal the very heart of God. The cross is where God’s life crosses our life to create life otherwise unimaginable.”⁶ “The beauty of the cross is meant to beckon us into friendship with God,” says Hauerwas. “God, through the cross, refuses our refusal of friendship. Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, even humbling himself, being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, so that he might overwhelm our determined isolation and claim us as friends. And by claiming us, Christ makes friendship with one another a possibility and, perhaps, even friendship with ourselves.”⁷

It’s an extraordinarily curious friendship—arguably the most crucial friendship in the history of our human race. It’s the curious friendship of God accommodating God’s own Self (God’s own heart of flesh) to our humanity and our inhumanity. Having moved forward into twenty-one centuries, the ongoing providential miracle of the cross is that it not only convicts us and our present day generations of our deep sinfulness and self-deception, but it also potentially sets us free. Free to live as “a company of forgiven forgivers,” says Donald Shriver⁸—“forgiven forgivers” who have been offered a new beginning, a new humanity in Christ our ultimate Friend. Through the self-giving friendship of Jesus, God calls us to become better than we are during the tragic events of Holy Week. In the memorable words of Donald Dawe, Jesus will die “our death so that we may live his life”⁹—so that we may live as self-giving lovers and not as unforgiving sinners. And as another wise teacher used to say, in loving and following Jesus, our dearest Friend, we open ourselves to the possibility of becoming more “like what we love.”¹⁰

Yes, Jesus, please remember us when you come into your kingdom! Yes, dear ones, when Christians throughout the world receive our Lord’s Last Supper this Maundy Thursday, they personally will come face-to-face with the following soul-searching faith. As we remember him and as he remembers us, Christ our brother takes us into his life. And, as we take him into our lives, we are bonded with him in spiritual discipleship and in his passionate ministry for others. This, says the visionary novelist Marilynne Robinson, is one of the most precious insights we have received from John Calvin. It is a vision of “experience as encounter.”¹¹

Thus, Stanley Hauerwas gives us this compelling, magnet-like prayer for all our experiential encounterings at our Lord’s table for the rest of our lives:

So now let us come to the table, the table to which we have been led by the cross, the table where God welcomes us as friends, to handle his Christ. Here God invites us to share with him and one another the body and blood of Christ so that the world may know that we have been befriended.¹²

For the cross of Jesus, as “the divine self-emptying,”¹³ is the “ultimate illumination”¹⁴ of God’s friendship. Here we have, preeminently, says Reinhold Niebuhr, “the merciful action of a forgiving God...”¹⁵ Here we behold the crucified Christ as the

ultimate revelation of God's character and purpose.¹⁶ Here Christ's suffering death graces us with the hope that our self-regard can be transmuted into self-forgetfulness and sacrificial love.¹⁷ Here befriended by the Christ of the cross, we are called to a state of "contrite self-awareness."¹⁸ Here God's ultimate friendship encounters us with a demanding "invitation to honest self-analysis,"¹⁹ that is, to "analyze ourselves without deception or illusion."²⁰ For "all of Jesus' teachings on forgiveness declare in effect that only God and sinful [people], that is, [people] who are aware of their own sins, can be forgiving to [others],"²¹ says Niebuhr. As God climbs onto the cross of Golgotha, we are simultaneously both judged and blessed by a "contrite awareness" that all of us, who are both good and evil, "must be reconciled to God."²² And with this self-knowledge comes our "release from sin through forgiveness and the hope of a new life."²³

Yes, as Christ our self-emptying brother takes us into his life, and as we take him into our lives, this bonding "experience as encounter" is powerfully personal. Even so, over the past few decades, I have become intrigued by many friends and acquaintances, who have become more and more reluctant, shy, apologetic, and maybe even embarrassed to talk about their experience of Christ's deeply personal friendship.

Please let me try to unpack this. Roughly thirty years ago, after a funeral in Pasadena, California, a revered patriarch, a community pillar and former mayor of the City of Roses, pulled me aside. He was a very outgoing leader, a magnanimous and compassionate extrovert. But this time, the cat had his tongue. I remember he was shy, reluctant, perhaps even a bit embarrassed. "Don't get me wrong," he spoke to me softly, "but I need to tell you something. I need you to let me tell you about what Jesus has meant to my life across the years. I need you to know. Don't get me wrong," he almost apologized. "This may surprise you, but it's personal. It's very personal. You see, Jesus is my brother. I mean Jesus has been with me like an incomparable older brother, all my life. It's personal," he said again, "very personal."

It's true, I'm sure, that many of us who grew up in the Christian faith have been sorely tempted to shy away from and even set aside the intimate friendship of Jesus as we have journeyed along the urbane and sophisticated roads of our lives. George Lindbeck, who taught at Yale University Divinity School, described this temptation as our tendency toward "deChristianization." Lindbeck prophesied that we sometimes try to "deChristianize" our faith, especially when it threatens to embarrass our cherished urbanity, sophistication, and more secular grown-up ways.

Yet, lo and behold, sometimes our children lead us back when we seek to set Jesus aside. Or sometimes we go through a critical passage or crisis or threshold experience that flips or jolts us back to Jesus. Perhaps some of us gathered here have been tempted, not unlike the late twentieth century parents in Stephen Dunn's soul-searching poem. The parents, outwardly quite secular and urbane, have apparently set Jesus aside. "It was supposed to be arts and crafts for a week," one of them confesses. But soon it became clear that this was Bible School. Please listen. Do you know these anxious parents and their little daughter's hunger for Jesus?

It had been so long since we believed, so
long
since we needed Jesus
as our nemesis and friend, that we thought

he was sufficiently dead,
that our children would think of him like
 Lincoln
or Thomas Jefferson.
Soon it became clear to us: you can't
 teach disbelief
to a child,
only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a
 story
nearly as good.

Could we say Jesus
doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible
is a great book certain people use
to make you feel bad? We sent her back
without a word.

I didn't have
a wonderful story for my child
and she was beaming. All the way
 home in the car
she sang the songs,
occasionally standing up for Jesus.
There was nothing to do
but drive, ride it out, sing along
in silence.²⁴

On the small front lawn of a halfway home for sick street people in Washington, D.C., there is a modest sculpture of Jesus who kneels with basin and towel, as if ready to wash the feet of friends. Gordon Cosby, who was pastor of the church that commissioned the sculpture, recounted the curious ways that passersby relate to it.

Many pause and ponder intensely. When a drunken man passed by, he shared his drink with Jesus. He left his container in the basin; and after struggling to reflect, he returned to remove the brown paper wrapping so that his gift would be more available and seemly. Some see that story as an unexpected, unknowing act of grace, while others see it as sacrilegious. Who knows? I suppose Jesus knows.

Another captivated visitor brought a dead Christmas tree and put it in the Jesus basin. Then, Gordon Cosby, who was cleaning the cluttered lawn, removed the tree because it was blocking the water flow. This prompted that visitor to chastise Cosby indignantly saying, "But he's my friend; he's my friend; he's my friend!" To which Cosby finally responded, "Well, he's my friend too," as he returned the tree to the sacred basin.

Although most of us cannot find sufficient words to describe precisely what it is that also makes us yearn to put our own curious gifts in Jesus' basin, we are nevertheless really and, yes, magnetically drawn to do so throughout the circling years of our lives. For we too love this Jesus, and he is our Friend, and we find ourselves

mystically compelled to touch his cleansing towel and to be washed by the life-giving water in his basin. Moreover, something way down inside also makes us want to go beyond these deep yearnings for ourselves. Something urges us to take both towel and basin and share them with others.

According to Gordon Cosby, there has been only one major ongoing criticism about the sculpture: its location. Worried critics complain that its location is way too accessible. The sculpture, they say, needs to be removed and relocated—removed from the street level. Why? Because it's too vulnerable, too susceptible to danger, violence, and indignity, they say. Best to put it up safe somewhere, they seem to imply, somewhere protected and secure where we can more remotely wave our cloaks and palm branches and sing our well-meant yet sometimes fickle hosannas, with no potential harm hovering nearby.

To which, if we reverently listen, we can sometimes hear a pleading, authoritative voice. "I tell you, Nay!" the voice commands. "Please leave me right here 'where cross the crowded ways of life,'²⁵ where I sorely belong. Please leave me here in the swirling, messy thick of it all. Please leave me here, with my towel and basin, where countless indispensable loved ones daily walk, talk, dream, worry, scheme, stumble, grumble, laugh, boast, sin, and cry. Please leave me here where you need me most, whether you realize it or not, here to immerse myself in the pervasive hurt of humanity. I want to pour myself out for you here where my precious friends hurt and hope and need me most."²⁶

As someone has testified, "A God who is not in Christ does little more than throw Jesus under the bus, but a God who is in Christ empties the self at the cross. This is an astounding proposition."²⁷ Truth is, God plans to use all these dramatic Holy Week events for the good. Yes, God will put our sins and complicities to death with Jesus. Yes, this miraculously befriending One who will die for us will become a bonded part of us, giving us a new vision of God and ourselves. Indeed, our old selves will be crucified with the Christ who will empty himself.

To be sure, in today's profound, compelling, gripping passages for Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday (in Luke's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Philippians), we learn who Jesus is, and we learn who Jesus is calling us to be. Yes, today we glimpse God's providential Holy Week strategy to rescue the world. Today we come upon the saving bath that we must receive, the bath of Jesus' outpoured friendship, the cleansing flood of God's outpouring love through Jesus' life and death. Today Jesus our servant Friend instructs us about the intended pattern of our own friendships. Washed by the saving love of Jesus, we too are called to become givers of merciful love in our intricate, threatening, complex, and challenging relationships with one another: spouse/spouse, partner/partner, sibling/sibling, parent/child, teacher/pupil, mentor/mentee, black/white, Anglo/Latino, privileged/poor, friend/enemy, activist/quietist, Republican/Democrat, rural/urban, police/communities, believer/non-believer, young/old, Christian/Muslim, capitalist/socialist, employee/employer, politician/voter, citizen/immigrant, insider/outsider—you name the relationships. We, too, must be caring washers. We, too, must be self-giving friends.

"You are my friends," Jesus assures us later in John's Gospel. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."²⁸ Thus, when the great pastor theologian Jonathan Edwards lay dying, it is remembered that he spoke these precious words: "Now where is Jesus of Nazareth, my true and never-failing friend?"²⁹

A few of us here this morning have heard tell of one Walter Johnson. He was a beloved young preaching professor at Austin Seminary several decades ago. He grew up in the First Presbyterian Church of Shreveport. Family and friends called him Bubba. When he lay dying of cancer, he received a telegram from a beloved mentor, Paul Scherer, whose compassionate message contained these four empowering words: "We have a Friend."

Yes, dear Friends; this is the Spirit's ultimate message during Holy Week, a message that surely enabled Bubba Johnson to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and into the Everlasting Arms, a message that, by the amazing grace of Jesus Christ, is meant for you and me as well, all the days of our lives: "We have a Friend." "We have a Friend."

Our prayer is from the Breastplate of St. Patrick of Ireland:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every[one] who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
Amen.

Notes

- 1 From the *Ecumenical Service of Prayer for Christian Unity*, 1980.
- 2 My words are influenced here by the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, who uses the phrase, "the final prevailing love of God." See William Stacy Johnson, ed., *H. Richard Niebuhr* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 206.
- 3 Jill Duffield, "Editor's Outlook: What Holy Week means for the rest of the world," *Presbyterian Outlook*, February 29, 2016, 6.
- 4 Gerald O'Collins, "The Calvary Christ," *Presbyterian Outlook*, March 20, 1978, 1.
- 5 Quoted from Reinhold Niebuhr, in *Justice and Mercy*, ed. Ursula Niebuhr (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), 93.
- 6 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Cross—Shattered Church* (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2009), 61.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 8 Donald W. Shriver, Jr., "Politics: The Mismaligned Calling," in *The Living Pulpit* 5 (April-June, 1996), 10.
- 9 Donald G. Dawe, *Jesus—Lord of All Times* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1990), 119.
- 10 Diogenes Allen, "Jesus' Passion and Ours: To Love Justice Itself," *Christian Century*, February 17, 1988, 157.
- 11 See Scott Hoezee, "A World of Beautiful Souls: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," *Perspectives*, May 2005, 13.
- 12 Hauerwas, 61.
- 13 Christopher P. Momany, "In defense of atonement theology: Affirmation of being," *Christian Century*, February 5, 2014, 26.
- 14 The words, *ultimate illumination*, are used by Reinhold Niebuhr when speaking of the cross. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 142.
- 15 Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, 88.
- 16 Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times*, 140.
- 17 Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, 88.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 94.

20 *Ibid.*, 95.

21 *Ibid.*, 94.

22 *Ibid.*, 87.

23 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Foolishness of the Cross and the Sense of History," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, The Library of America, ed. Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2015), 818.

24 See Barbara K. Lundblad, "A Particular Story," *Christian Century*, July 24-31, 1991, 715.

25 See Frank Mason North's compelling Social Gospel hymn, "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life," *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), No. 343.

26 I regret that I no longer have the source of these remembrances by Gordon Cosby.

27 Momany, 26.

28 John 15:13-14.

29 See George A. Buttrick, "The Friendliness of Jesus," *The Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church News*. Vol. 12, No. 4, April 1950.