**The Friends We Are**

**Ruth 1:1-18**

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If you are a spiritual seeker, and you have not yet read any books by Barbara Brown Taylor, I can’t recommend her enough.  She has written a number of books, including *Leaving Church* and *Learning to Walk in the Dark.*  She has a pastor’s heart and an academic’s intellect.  She is insightful, inspiring, and offers new perspectives on what it means to grow in faith.  In a recent interview, she was asked what is life-giving for you? Her answer was interesting.  She said that is a question that we have to ask ourselves almost every day because it changes so often, but that in this phase of her life, “the ordinary is calling to me like it has never called to me before.  It is the slowed down ordinary things of life. To have a friend. The life I’ve lived is not conducive to friendship, and if friendship isn’t a spiritual practice,” she says, “I don’t know what is.”

For the last couple of weeks, we have been exploring the relationship between faith and friendship.  The first week we talked about making friends. Last week, we discussed bringing friends to church. This week, our topic is The Friends We Are – or, in other words, what qualities make for a friendship that goes deeper than a shared interest and into the territory of the soul.

A spiritual practice can be defined as an activity that opens us to God’s grace and God’s love.  Prayer, of course, is a spiritual practice, as are worship and service and reading scripture. So, what can we do in our friendships that open us to God so that, in some way, we embody Jesus to one another?

The Bible is full of life-changing friendships.  Often, when we think of the Old Testament, we remember the hostile relationships – Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath, Jacob and Esau.  But, there are also some beautiful examples of friendship – one of the most profound is that between Naomi and Ruth.

To really appreciate what happens in the Book of Ruth, you have to understand a little bit about the cultural context of the story.  Naomi has just lost her husband as well as both of her sons. This means that she has no man to care for her, no means of getting food or supporting herself.   In this time and place, to become an heirless widow could be a death sentence for an aging woman.

Though she had been living in Moab with her family, Naomi decides to go back to her home in Bethlehem, but tells her two daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and try to rebuild their lives where they have more relatives to help them.  Orpah agrees, but, despite the risks of poverty and death, Ruth responds with this beautiful speech in which she declares her loyalty and love. “Don’t force me to leave you; don’t make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I’ll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I’ll die, and that’s where I’ll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!”

Yes, it is a beautiful speech, but, again, its power lies in its context.  Ruth is a Moabite and there had long been animosity between the people of Judah and those of Moab.  Plus, she is a Gentile, which by Jewish law meant she was an outsider. She promises to stay with Naomi despite the fact that she is not likely to be welcomed or accepted in Bethlehem.  At best, she will be tolerated. Yet, her words tell us that her relationship with Naomi is more important than what other people think of her or the loss of status and respect that will come with a Moabite woman moving into a Jewish community.

      This suggests to us, then, that one characteristic of friendship as a spiritual practice is a willingness to put our own needs aside from time to time for the sake of our friend. I suspect we all have times when we make a choice between our own needs or preferences and the needs of a friend.  When has that happened in your life? Have there been times when have you chosen to care for a friend when you might rather have done something else? Or when you have stood up for a friend despite some risk to yourself?

      The other lesson in spiritual friendship that we glean from Naomi and Ruth is that of accepting the other.  Naomi has every reason to forbid her sons from marrying Moabite women. Ruth has every reason to stay home in Moab when her husband dies.  But, each of them accepts the other despite their differences, despite what their communities and families might say. They look beyond the long-time feud between their two countries to see the beauty and value of the individual.

      Of course, the New Testament, too, offers us insight into friendship as a spiritual practice.  We have talked already about how the relationship between Jesus and the disciples teaches us so much about how to treat each other.   The author of the letter to the Colossians summarizes a lot of what Jesus taught about relationships in the few verses we just heard. We should enter into our relationships clothed in “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience”.  In some ways, these things seem pretty obvious, but the passage goes on to demonstrate these qualities in practice – and, as always, practice seems so much more difficult than theory.

For example, Colossians tells us to bear with each other.  Be tolerant and patient. There are always times when friends get under each other’s skin.  We all have friends who get annoying – they can be too needy or they get loud and dominating or they say things that they know are likely to provoke an argument.  We have friends who sometimes don’t listen well or who try to influence how we think. We have friends who don’t understand why we attend church or what our faith means to us.  Yet, we are most Christ-like in our friendships when we work to be patient, to tolerate, to be present through the annoyance to find the good deeper within.

Secondly, Colossians says, “forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, you must forgive each other”.  That can be incredibly difficult - perhaps the challenging discipline we are called to. It’s pretty easy to forgive the little things – some of the annoyances I was just talking about.  But, what about the big things. How do you forgive when a friend lies to you? When a friend hurts you? When a friend betrays you?

We are people of grace.  God is patient and tolerant and forgiving of us and asks that we offer the same to each other.  Forgiveness most often has more to do with you than it does with the person you are working to forgive.  As long as you hold onto resentment, you inhibit your own growth, your own ability to move on, and your own path to healing.  Forgiveness doesn’t mean saying “oh, it’s okay” – it means to stop wishing things had been different. It means saying I am not going to allow what you did to alter my life anymore.  I am going to seek the peace of Christ within myself and in my relationship with you.

And finally Colossians tells us to “teach and admonish each other in all wisdom”.  One of the greatest gifts we can give each other is honesty. Christian friends are not afraid to guide and challenge each other.  To ask questions, to push a little bit, to help each other grow, to speak a truth that might be hard for our friend to hear because we want our friends to grow into the best of who God created them to be. We can take the risk of compassionate honesty because we trust the foundation of the friendship - we trust that the friendship is grounded in God’s love and in our love for each other.

For people who follow Jesus, love is the guiding principle of life and the motivation, the promise we have that keeps us going is the promise of God’s kingdom -God’s vision for a world community that is just and peaceful and united by mutual respect and love.  Two people who are friends and begin with that common understanding will find the way through all the challenges that come up in a lifetime of friendship because they believe that God’s kingdom will come and that each of us is part of making that happen.

We’ve spent a lot of time over the last several weeks talking about relationships – about neighbors and friends – partly because I believe each of us grows in faith through the relationships we nurture in our lives.  But, also because ultimately it is our relationships with each other that make the kingdom of God visible to the rest of the world.

So, who are the spiritual friends in your life?  Do you have one or two? Sometimes, in the chaotic messiness of 21st century life, friends seem like a luxury, an extra, not a necessity.  C.S. Lewis points out we don’t need the love of friends to procreate or to survive as we need sexual love or parental love. “Friendship is unnecessary,” he says, “like philosophy, like art… It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival*.”*

I would amend that a bit and say that while we may not need friends for physical survival, we do need friends if we are going to continue to grow into the best of who God created us to be.  We need friends to help us learn what God is like, to help us see and practice what is means to be like Jesus – self-giving, accepting, patient, forgiving, and honest. And that is good not just for us as individuals but for the growth of the Kingdom of God.  Through our deepest friendships, we demonstrate what the Kingdom of God might look like. And, as Barbara Brown Taylor has said, “if that’s not a spiritual practice, I don’t know what is.”

May it be so. Amen.