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Blessed Friendship

Special friendships come in unforeseen seasons. And in this world, they do not last forever. As we grow older, we ache, says Shakespeare, "for precious friends hid in death's dateless night."

And yet there are precious memories of those seasons when time and place forged in us something more than the routine of human association. We are always on the lookout for that sacred bond that transcends but uses time.

In my own life I can remember such seasons as when I was just a boy in an ordinary neighborhood, which appeared to me in puerile terms an almost idyllic world. It was close and secure, full of falling outs and arguments and renewed pledges of friendships, all I took to be perfectly normal.

And then, growing older, there came the various stages of life, the camaraderie of adolescents – not all good, the zealous experiences of college, the intoxication of rational air in graduate school. At each stage there appeared a form of friendship. Time and place and chance soon did their work and these in their integrity were lost also.

Now the separation of close friends comes with a harsher actuality. Death closes off the communication we are accustomed to, requiring faith in a communion tongued with fire.

It was Aristotle who said, "The friend is another self." And he was surely right. Friendship has within it, at least, what C. S. Lewis refers to as the common delight of looking together at truth's revelation and saying "Do you see it as I see it?" And the response is a joyful and resounding "Yes!"

But Aristotle, in the keenness and discipline of his thought, was able also to distinguish kinds of friendship. And these are useful although by means of analysis somewhat dry, at least to those who do not care for philosophy.

According to the great teacher, the first kind of friendship is that of entertainment. We have and use some friends when we simply want to have a good time. It is perfectly normal, something that blossoms out of mutual interests and likes. There is nothing wrong with this kind of friendship. It is simply limited. Discussions of religion and politics are usually avoided.

The second kind is that of utility. This is the realm altogether necessary for life in the city or even in the church. It is concerned with what is useful to everyone involved. We all benefit from a collaboration of will and the completion of the common task through diverse and shared gifts.

The highest form of friendship is that of the good. It is concerned with the good for the sake of the good. And thus its delight is in knowing the good in all its levels and degrees and willing it accordingly. This friendship goes beyond mere entertainment or utility to the knowledge of virtue and the love of its truth, not a mere abstraction of knowledge or love, but these lived in a constant activity.

The three kinds that I have briefly described are not necessarily exclusive of each other, but they are not equal. The friendship of the good may embrace the other kinds, but the other kinds do not embrace it.

But now we must go beyond the wisdom of Aristotle to Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfills the wisdom of the great teacher. He is the Incarnation of friendship. And so he can say quite definitively, "Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14). Jesus could say this with absolutely no reservation because he always sought to do the Father's will, and it was his Father who alone was, and is, good (Matthew 19:17).

We should be careful to understand that Jesus did not mean that obedience is a prerequisite for friendship. What he meant was that in keeping his commandments one lives into the life of the Father in the same way that he himself does. Those who obey his commands possess, with him, the true friendship of the good.

And so it follows, if it is true that Jesus does only the will of his Father, and thereby lives in and for the good, the highest and truest form of friendship is the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Their life together is the infinite possession of goodness, which by grace, they share with us.

And the consequence of this glorious truth is this. If we are made in the image of God, and seek, by grace to participate in his life, then we shall seek the friendship of the good, the friendship of the Incarnate Lord. Indeed, his friendship is what we all seek, even when we seek it in all the wrong places.

To return to C.S. Lewis again. In his masterful essay, "The Inner Ring," he shows how human beings are always trying to be on the inside of social cliques, which appear to be circles of friendship, but are really only momentary associations. These are, at best, Aristotle's friendships of entertainment or utility, and at worst, the smirks and nods and winks of vacuous hubris, a moment devoid of meaning.

The fact that the friendship of the good is at the heart of human desire is best depicted in Dante. In the Inferno the pit of Hell is occupied by the three faced head of Satan devouring Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot. They are examples of treachery and betrayal, Brutus and Cassius in the secular realm and Judas in the sacred.

Dante's portrayal of Hell is a grotesque parody of the life of the Trinity in the Paradiso. In pure and infinite delight, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit indwell one another, and in the sphere of God the Son, Dante sees the image of the Incarnate Christ.

Dante is telling us that we are made for friendship with God. And so our lives have a choice, either the final torment of a perverse association or the blessed friendship of the good.

Blessed friendship finally amounts to this. Amidst the changes and chances of this mortal life, there is only one path to true friendship and that is the path our Lord took. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

In the last analysis, the friendship of the good is the friendship of selfless and sacrificial love, no matter what the cost, and come what may. And so our friendship may become blessed because his already is. From this point of view, all friendship that has been lost may be found, especially those "hid in death's dateless night." For theirs is the darkness of God, and for them the light of resurrection is about to dawn in a season of friendship unforeseen but endless.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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