

DEEP FRIENDSHIP
A Sermon by Rev. Brent Coffin
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
June 1, 2014

Text: John 15:10-14

1. The Occasion of Scotty McLennan's Retirement as Dean for Religious Life

It is truly my honor to be with you this morning in this beautiful house of worship. Thank you to all in the Office for Religious Life for making today possible. I especially want to acknowledge our dear friend Ellen McLennan. Ellen, you have sheltered us with enduring friendship many times over these last thirty years, and are doing so once again. Thank you!

Scotty McLennan tells us in his book *Finding Your Religion* that each faith tradition is a path up a single spiritual mountain.¹

I am a Presbyterian Protestant, born and bred in the shadowy ravines of the spiritual mountain. Your Dean, I'm sure, was born higher up the mountain with a broad, sunlit view of the open horizon—a setting, I imagine, like the Stanford campus. We all come from different places, but what matters is where we're going and how we get there.

Over his thirty years of university ministry, Scotty has befriended many fellow travelers, encouraging us to find our own best ways, on or off the beaten paths. I don't dare summarize the scope and vitality of this remarkable journey—many of you know parts of it I do not. I simply want to say to my colleague: Well done, Scotty!

You have lived a spiritual vision both Unitarian in depth and Universalist in scope. Unitarian in seeing every path up the spiritual mountain as a way to enrich the single web of life in the One Spirit of God. And universal: always insisting that transcendent vision and guiding values cannot be sequestered into our private lives, nor even confined to a separate religious domain.

¹ Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up with Has Lost Its Meaning*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999; pp. 1-9.

You've taught us that without our deeply held convictions of what is good and true we lose our way. They guide who we are. We carry them wherever we go. And you've playfully challenged us to live them in every sphere of life. Well done, Dean McLennan!

2. Is Friendship a Lesser Love?

We are taking time this morning to acknowledge Scotty's approaching retirement as Dean for Religious Life, which of course is also a new beginning. I am here to acknowledge my love for a dear friend. So friendship is the focus of my reflections with you this morning.

What is the place of friendship in the landscape of our lives? Why does it matter? How do we nurture it?

As I began to reflect on these questions, I was surprised to discover how little is said of friendship in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. The most detailed account of friendship is the Book of Job. Job's friends are a veritable case study in unempathic, judgmental torment. If such is friendship, better we concentrate on understanding our enemies. And that's what the Good Book does. Following an English translation, the Bible speaks of enemies about four times more often than friends.² (I trust that's not the ratio here at Stanford.)

But why? The Bible's primary concern is not with those who are drawn to one another. God's redemptive project takes the form of a covenant among humans who find it hard to get along. And covenantal life depends on fulfilling our obligations not just to friends and family, but to all persons with equal regard. In the Law of Moses we are instructed: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."³

In the Christian tradition, the love of friends—*philia*—has been regarded most often as a lesser love.⁴ Friendship is not merely personal: it is preferential. Unlike our obligation to citizens and aliens, we prefer the company of our friends because they bring us pleasure, encourage us, and reflect well upon us.

So it is that Kierkegaard speaks for the majority when he insists that friendship is selfishness in disguise.

² The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

³ Leviticus 19:34.

⁴ A classical statement of this view is Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

“Love and friendship are the very height of self-feeling,” he tells us. If anyone thinks that...by finding a friend he has learned Christian love, he is in profound error... [T]he beloved whom he loves as himself is not his neighbor; the beloved is his other-I.”⁵

The world of friendship is based on our preference for those who make us feel good about ourselves. It’s an exclusive love. The world of agape is based on equal regard for all our neighbors near and far. It’s an inclusive love. In this view we must not confuse one with the other.

3. Jesus’ Commandment in the Gospel of John

Perhaps, then, Jesus is confused. He seems to be doing just that in our text this morning: linking the unconditional love of God with the cultivation of human friendship. Listen once again:

This is my commandment, that you love one another (*agapate*) as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (*philon*). You are my friends if you do what I command you.

There seems to be an internal logic at work here. The premise of Jesus’ command is that divine agape is given without qualification. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as *I have loved you*.” Period! Done! The premise is not conditional or potential. It’s an accomplished reality.

What remains conditional is how we respond to the unconditional love that infuses our being. One possibility is to form new friendships. Not friendships that leave us comfortably where we are: friendships in which we are drawn out of our self-contained identities into the redemptive process of learning to love others as they are—unconditionally, irrevocably loved of God.

What kind of friends are we?

4. Aristotle’s Types of Friendship

⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 58.

Aristotle's study of the good polis or city-state led him to ask just this question. He distinguished three possibilities. We develop friendships that are useful; friendships that give us pleasure; and friendships that allow us to recognize and pursue what is most important in fulfilling our lives, the good.⁶

Aristotle's first type is the person we find useful. Useful friends provide information, access, business contacts, job leads, club memberships, references, and so forth. In my experience, useful friendships predominate in our work settings. The associations we cultivate are naturally those that help us succeed, perform well, and achieve our ambitions. Quite often our useful friends are those with equal or more influence, not those with less. But sometimes it works the other way. We become useful friends to others by mentoring new or less experienced persons, helping them find their way without concern for our resume.

One of my earliest memories of my friend Scotty goes back to 1984, thirty years ago this summer. Scotty was doing poverty law in urban Dorchester, and I was pondering the value of continuing with a doctoral program. This guy I hardly knew invited me to lunch, listened to my dilemma, and encouraged me to forge ahead. I benefitted from a new, useful friend. But this is not why I'm here today. Useful friendships, Aristotle tells us, do not last. When one is no longer useful to the other, the friendship dissolves; we move on to more useful connections.

With time, Scotty and I developed a deeper friendship, something akin to Aristotle's second type based on pleasure. One of the most enjoyable summers of my life was 1987. My wife Poppy and Ellen were on Cape Cod with our five children. Scotty was Chaplain at Tufts University. I was cramming two years of German into eight weeks—not the most exciting summer. But each Friday after work, my buddy and I would jump in the car and file into that sixty mile backup creeping out to the Cape. It was amazing how a four hour drive would go by in fifteen minutes... when we were having fun.

Yet again, Aristotle cautions us: friendships based on pleasure, like usefulness, tend not to last. We change, move on, develop new interests, no longer have time for one another; and the friendship fades into the past. Striking, isn't it, how many friends we have enjoyed, yet with whom we no longer stay in touch.

There is a third type of friendship, Aristotle concludes, that does last. It's the friend with whom we can see more clearly what matters most in our lives. It's the friend in whom we see

⁶*Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. A New Translation by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011; p. 166-69.

qualities of heart and mind, the passions and pursuits that inspire our own. “In this kind of love,” writes C.S. Lewis, ‘Do you love me?’ means “Do you see the same truth.”⁷

5. The Space of Deep Friendship

It is difficult to step to the inside, as it were, and to describe what actually happens for us in the spaces of our deep friendships. Here I can offer a few closing observations, by way of inviting you to think of your friends.

In the space of deep friendship, we are freed from the fear of judgment in order to be honest.

We penetrate the avalanches of information to focus on what is important.

We develop a common language to speak of what matters most.

We listen to one another, not to respond but to hear.

We listen more deeply to hear another’s truth, even if it lies beyond words.

In the space of mutual listening, we loosen our grip on tightly held answers so they can develop.

We let living questions to come to the surface—the questions we cannot avoid, even if we cannot answer.

The space we share is centered in the present, but not confined to it. It goes back to draw on shared memories. It opens ahead to peer into a common future.

Our accomplishments and aspirations don’t vanish; they become anchored in gratitude.

So what do you think? Is Kierkegaard right? Is friendship little more than selfishness in disguise? Or is Jesus calling us to something deeper and wider, the journey of a lifetime?

Useful friends serve our interests. Without them we could not do what we do in a single day, much less for fourteen years or a lifetime. Let us not disparage the good of being useful to one another. And friends we enjoy leaven our lives with gladness. Let’s not be too busy to savor time with our friends.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Four Loves*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1988: p.66.

Yet what's brought me here today are deep friendships—yours and mine. Those that renew and enlarge our souls because they remind us we live unconditionally loved; and so they help us to love more unconditionally. We see the shadow of our doubts stalking us, but then our faith is strengthened. We acknowledge the discouragement beneath our confidence, and our hope is replenished. We admit the limits of our capacity to love, and are encouraged to love more completely.

As Scotty has shown so many of us, these are not merely private matters. They are the eyes through which we see the world. They help us to see others, to imagine what's possible, to fashion a greater good.

Surely Reinhold Niebuhr is right: “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime, therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love.”

Scotty, I love you! We love you! And thank you for helping us to befriend one another!