

FRIENDSHIP IN STEINBECK'S OF MICE AND MEN

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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There are two different accounts in the New Testament of Jesus' disciples asking him how to pray. What has become known as the Lord's Prayer comes in two different forms, this one in today's gospel lesson from Lukeⁱ being shorter and less familiar than that in Matthew.ⁱⁱ They seem to stem from separate liturgical traditions in the early church. Matthew has seven petitions, while Luke has only five.ⁱⁱⁱ But Luke alone follows the recitation of the Lord's Prayer with a fascinating parable about the potential limits of friendship in the middle of the night. The point of the parable seems to be that if one is persistent in asking something of a friend, even when it's very inconvenient, one's petitions will be answered. How much more will one be blessed, then, if one is persistent in praying to God, our heavenly Parent?^{iv}

John Steinbeck's short novel Of Mice and Men is all about friendship in the middle of the night -- that is, under very difficult circumstances of rural poverty during the Depression. Following my sermonic theme of the last couple of weeks -- not only loving God with all of one's heart, mind and soul but also loving one's neighbor as oneself -- I'd like to explore Steinbeck's understanding of friendship with you this morning. Ultimately, I hope it will illuminate what it means existentially to knock at the door and then have it opened unto us.

For those of you who haven't read Of Mice and Men recently, let me remind you of the basic plot: Two friends named George and Lennie are migrant farm workers, looking for employment near where Steinbeck grew up in Salinas, California. Lennie is huge, strong and mentally challenged. George is the brains of the duo as they travel from ranch to ranch. They have their own version of the American Dream: "Someday--we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs...an' live off the fatta the lan'."^v They also have a secret power -- their friendship:

"Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place... They ain't got nothing to look ahead to. With us, it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go... Not us...Because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why."^{vi}

George, however, often sees this friendship as inconvenient and problematic, to say the least, largely because Lennie likes to pet soft objects with his large, strong hands. It's one thing when those are mice, which he often unknowingly crushes and kills, but when it's a woman's soft dress and he doesn't let go, George and Lennie can end up running for their lives, as they are at the beginning of the book.^{vii} So George laments, "God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an' no trouble. No mess at all..." He gets angrier: "An' whatta I got, I got you! You can't keep a job, and you lose me ever' job I get. Jus' keep me shovin' all over the country all the time. An' that ain't the worst. You get in trouble. You do bad things and

I got to get you out." His voice rises nearly to a shout: "You crazy son-of-a-bitch. You keep me in hot water all the time."^{viii} So, there's friendship in the middle of the night in more than one sense.

Most of the book's action takes place on a new ranch for George and Lennie. Trouble builds with the boss's son, Curley, who's a bully, and with his wife, who seems more interested in several of the farm hands than in her husband. Along the way, George and Lennie's friendship and hope becomes infectious for a number of the workers living together in the bunk house. First, an old handyman named Candy offers his life savings of \$350 to join in George's and Lennie's American Dream to get a couple of acres and a house and live off the fat of the land.^{ix} Then the African American stable hand, Crooks, offers to come in and work for no pay except his keep.^x

A relationship also builds between George and the preeminent worker, Slim, who drives the mules pulling the large equipment on the farm.^{xi} Slim observes that "I hardly never seen two guys travel together," and then tells George that it "seems kinda funny a cuckoo like him and a smart little guy like you travelin' together."^{xii} But Slim is also clear that "Maybe he ain't bright, but I never seen such a worker...There ain't nobody can keep up with him."^{xiii} Moreover, "He's a nice fella... Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella."^{xiv} Slim and George agree that learning how to be nice also has a lot to do with having a good friendship and not being off alone all the time.^{xv}

In the end, Lennie ends up in big trouble because Curley's wife finds him petting a puppy in the barn on a Sunday afternoon. She's very lonely, and sits down with him in the hay to talk. In the process, she realizes that he's pet the puppy too hard and killed it. Bizarrely, she asks him to stroke her soft hair, and then suddenly demands that he stop, because he'll mess it up. As she jerks her head sideways and starts screaming at him, Lennie responds in his usual way when he gets scared: he holds on tightly. Before long her neck is broken and she's dead in his hands.

Her husband, Curley, vows immediate revenge on Lennie, and takes off after him with a shotgun. George finds Lennie first in a hiding place near the Salinas River. As Curley's voice, and that of other pursuers, are heard getting nearer and nearer, George sits with Lennie, asks him to look across the river, quietly raises a pistol behind his head, and once again rehearses their American Dream: "We gonna get a little place...An we'll have maybe a pig an' chickens...Gonna do it soon...You...an' me. Ever'body gonna be nice to you. Ain't gonna be no more trouble..."^{xvi} When George pulls the trigger, Lennie dies instantly, his last thought being of that paradise across the river.

Friends to the end. Friends through thick and thin. Friends who get up for each other in the middle of the darkest night and give whatever the other needs. Friends unto death. "Ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you."^{xvii}

This was a two-way street of friendship, as well. George needed Lennie to give direction to his life, to avoid descending into the abyss of isolation that he saw all around him. He could see the emptiness of the freedom he claimed to be losing by being with Lennie: "I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat house all night... Get a gallon of whiskey, or set in a pool room... Jus' foolin', Lennie. Cause I want you to stay with me."^{xviii} Directing and assisting Lennie gave some meaning to George's life, probably along with some sense of power or control.

Killing him was doubly difficult, because he was not only losing his companion, but was also

losing his distinctiveness in the migrant world in which he lived. As a critic puts it, "When George shoots Lennie, he is not destroying only the shared dream. He is also destroying the thing that makes him different and reducing himself to the status of an ordinary guy."^{xix} Yet, as another critic explains, "precisely the responsibilities of a perfect friendship require George to shoot Lennie."^{xx} The only solace at the very end of the book is that the great Slim comes forward to befriend George, sitting with him near the river where Lennie lies dead, and then helping to his feet, and walking him away from everyone else, saying privately to him, "Never you mind... You hadda, George. I swear you hadda. Come on with me."^{xxi}

"Abba [Father], hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come...And do not bring us to the time of trial."^{xxii} So Jesus taught his followers to pray. Yet, where was the kingdom for George and Lennie? And they were brought to the time of trial. Is this because there's no indication in Steinbeck's novel that they were praying people? How about those of us who have prayed often, and even desperately, and haven't received what we were asking or seeking? What about prayers over a child whom we longed would not be injured in an automobile accident, would not become involved with drugs, or would not get caught up in irresponsible relationships? But then they did. What about prayers for the healing of someone with cancer, who then dies? What about prayers that are not answered to get into Stanford, find a job, or not be laid off? What about all our prayers for peace and justice in the world?^{xxiii} In a few minutes, I'll lead us in the Prayers of the People in this service. What if many of those prayers seem to go unanswered?

Here's what I think is so powerful about the Christian understanding of prayer, as expressed in today's gospel lesson. God is imaged first as a friend, and then as the perfect Parent. Friends and parents who love us unconditionally stick with us through thick and thin. They companion us, they empathize with us, they care about us, even if they can't always make it better. We may have to be persistent when we're needy and the response seems slow in coming. Yet, in the end, they're usually there, although not necessarily in the ways we thought they would be or should be. The gospel message is that God is perfect and is always there, without exception: "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."^{xxiv}

However, we are finite and God is infinite. Just as children often cannot understand what their parents claim to be doing in their best interests, so we often cannot understand the ways of God. The book of Job is an extended treatise on this matter. The promise of this gospel lesson is simply that God's love is with us always. God is far more of a friend than our earthly friends; far more fatherly than our fathers and motherly than our mothers. As the Minnesota minister I quoted last week has put it, "God...loves us enough to give us what we need rather than what we want. Here [in this gospel lesson] we discover a God who has shaped us in the divine image and for a godly purpose, rather than for our own cravings."^{xxv}

Jesus teaches in today's parable that we should be as annoying with God as a friend who comes to us asking for something in the middle of the night when the house has been locked up and we're in bed. We should persist until we're engaged in a genuine conversation -- a full two-way street -- as we would like to have with the best of friends or the most loving imaginable parent. "Then we will never come away empty-handed from prayer, because even if we wind up with none of the things we thought we needed, we will always wind up with God listening, attending, and answering our prayers in ways we hadn't imagined."^{xxvi}

Lennie was actually lovingly killed by his friend. In so doing, George seemingly lost

everything himself. All was lost for both, except the lifelong fruits of a great friendship. A friendship that was irresistible to others, and one that may have spawned a new sustaining relationship between George and Slim. A friendship that stood in the face of economic dislocation, interpersonal cruelty, and mental disability. May we understand the connection between genuine friendship and genuine prayer. May our prayers be songs of love. May we have greater and greater understanding of who we are, and what in us is true, as we become one in living for each other. Amen.

NOTES

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- i. Luke 11: 1-13.
 - ii. Matthew 6: 9-13.
 - iii. The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 144.
 - iv. The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 238.
 - v. John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 15.
 - vi. Ibid.
 - vii. Ibid., pp.12-13. See also 41-42.
 - viii. Ibid., p. 12.
 - ix. Ibid., pp. 58-60.
 - x. Ibid., p. 75.
 - xi. Ibid., p. 33.
 - xii. Ibid., p. 39.
 - xiii. Ibid., p. 38-39.
 - xiv. Ibid., p. 40.
 - xv. Ibid., pp. 40-41.
 - xvi. Ibid., p. 103.
 - xvii. Luke 11: 9.
 - xviii. Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, pp. 12, 14.
 - xix. Warren French, John Steinbeck (Twayne Publishers, 1961).
 - xx. Howard Levant, Novels of John Steinbeck: A Critical Study (University of Missouri Press, 1974).

xxi. Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, pp. 104-105.

xxii. Luke 11: 2, 4.

xxiii. Stephanie Frey, "On God's Case," The Christian Century (July 13, 2004), p. 17.

xxiv. Luke 11:10.

xxv. Frey, "On God's Case," p. 17.

xxvi. Ibid.