

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
Summer Sermon Series  
August 5, 2007

## STORE UP TREASURES: THE WEALTH OF FRIENDSHIP

“Be on your guard...for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

~Luke 12:15

You might be wondering, as I was, after hearing this parable from the gospel of Luke – so what was the rich man’s folly? There appear to be numerous follies, one of which might suggest a security in self-sufficiency. The parable sketches the figure of someone who seems not to need anyone else. He can provide for himself and thus those provisions will take care of him for many years. It might also suggest no apparent need of the kind of security one gains from the love of family or faithful friends. No need of a community of support or even the security of God’s love.

To be frank, I can’t imagine what life would be like, at the end of the day, without friends. Whether a spiritual guide, a wise counselor, someone you could call in the middle of the night or simply laugh, cry with or just sit and do nothing, friends and friendship are the bedrock of life. Can friends be difficult or disappointing at times? Of course. It’s called being human. Nevertheless, I can’t imagine how we could develop a healthy spiritual life, as I conclude my sermon series today, without the presence of friends and friendship. In a timeless classic, *Spiritual Friendship*, written by Aelred of Rievaulx, beloved monk, abbot and spiritual guide of the 12<sup>th</sup> century said of friendship: “In human affairs nothing more sacred is striven for, nothing more useful is sought after, nothing more difficult is discovered, nothing more sweet experienced and nothing more profitable possessed, for friendship bears fruit in this life and in the next.”

That said, there’s no question that friendship requires both intention and attention. Most of us devote our primary attention to the facts of our lives, our work, our study – an ever-constant presence and demand. Our energy goes into doing. We wonder where we should be, what we should do, when in fact, more of our efforts maybe need to be concerned with how to be. Nevertheless, it seemed essential to me to consider the aspect of friendship in our understanding of what it means to have a healthy spiritual life.

Why?

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I happen to believe that the idea of belonging and relationship is as critical and tangential to the whole notion of spiritual longing. In an often relentless, rugged prospect of individualism in our culture, we often forget what it means to be human. Each and every one of us is a complex web of changing emotions and thoughts, often unsure of our place in this world, longing for something that we cannot quite name. Sometimes we experience joy and strength. Sometimes we are sad and confused. Human history, it has been said, is the story of abundant longing and insufficient answers.

Consequently, to long for peace, for God, spirituality, or in other words what I've referred to as a healthy spiritual life in this sermon series, is very natural. And this is where, in part, I think friendship comes in. To give voice to a spiritual longing is to reveal a side of ourselves that perhaps we've become skilled at hiding.

Today, with the pace of human activity and technology to which I've alluded to these past weeks, it's no wonder that we not only have no time to rest, or pray, or meditate, no time to call our own – we also have little time to nurture deep, abiding friendships or even rekindle lost friendships.

Nevertheless I believe friends, wherever our searching or our spiritual path finds us, have a way of leading us back to our true human nature. Opening up the secret of our human nature, revealing to ourselves and to each other our own soulful longings, our fear and uncertainty, our joy and wonder is a critical step on the journey to a healthy spiritual life. It's not something we can do or discover only alone, but in companionship, in friendship with others. The aspect of relatedness, connectedness, and interdependence is an idea that many see as God-arranged, in consideration with everything else in this universe, which includes one another.

One preacher wrote: "At the end of the day we tote up our score, not for or against the great social or intellectual systems of the world, but in terms of how we stand with the people we value, and perhaps even love."

Indeed, true friendship is a treasure, and perhaps one alluded to today as a counterpoint to the rich man's notion of self-sufficiency.

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It's been said that the best medicine in life is a friend. I was reminded of this so poignantly last Sunday after visiting Kevin at his home. He and his wife have been a part of our memchu community for some time now and celebrated their anniversary yesterday. Kevin is in the final stages of cancer and facing the end of his life soon.

On a website that keeps friends and family updated, as well as able to post messages to Kevin, he wrote one himself recently:

"After my cancer diagnosis over 3 years ago, a lot of people I had been close to earlier in life, got back in touch with me. I never expected to see many of these people again, but there they were. People I hadn't seen since grade school and high school traveled across country to visit me. My third grade teacher found me and told me she had kept one of my drawings under the glass on her desk for 30 years. People sent gifts and cards. Even my teachers from grad school were amazing and they spoke to me on a conference call, thanks to a former classmate. It was all a shock and surprise. That is what they call the gifts of cancer."

"A lot of people write about the gifts of cancer in their books and articles, but I could never understand it before. Even though there were many times in life I thought I was alone, I realize now I was never really alone in my life. I may have thought I was alone because I thought these people forgot me for a moment. Well, maybe they did for a moment as their lives unfolded, but not completely, I found. It's because I cared about them and they cared about me, I think. Who really knows how the magic of friendship works?"

"I believe in afterlife. If my 3rd grade teacher could find me after 40 years, then I believe we are ALL connected in some way. That is a comforting feeling. I believe in God, I just don't know exactly how God works. I guess I'm not supposed to know yet."

"I understand human nature a lot better since my illness. Cancer has given me more faith in human beings, a new appreciation for human kindness. Human kindness is just unlimited, it seems. This was something I never realized before I got sick. It was the most amazing lesson I ever learned. People are wonderful."

After visiting Kevin last Sunday and reading his posting, the words of Aelred kept echoing in my ears: "friendship bears fruit in this life...and the next."

I'm very grateful for knowing Kevin. His life emanates such strength and courage. When I arrived last Sunday to visit, he mentioned he listened to our radio broadcast and my sermon. The progression of the cancer has made him unable to leave home now. Maybe you're listening this morning Kevin and it gives me a chance to tell you how much you mean to me and so many others. You are dearly and deeply loved.

When I began this series, I know I promised you that I'd give you 12 steps to a healthy spiritual life at the conclusion. By no means are these definitive, nor are they in any particular order of importance. In fact, I'm a little reticent about steps and lists myself, but I also try to keep my promises...and not to take myself too seriously so here goes:

- 1. Give yourself permission to have a spiritual life to begin with, even if you're not sure what that means. If necessary, have your local clergy write you a permission slip.**
- 2. Find some people you love and who love you. Share a meal, a walk, a hike and spend at least part of the time discussing what really feeds your soul and spirit. Do this more than once per year.**
- 3. Build respites of quiet, Sabbath moments into your life. Even if only 5 minutes a day, find a way to stop, breathe, rest whether in a garden, home, apartment, or a quiet place on campus. Reacquaint yourself with prayer. If necessary, use words.**
- 4. Bring back into your vocabulary that indisputable, timeless word: NO. Use it early and often.**
- 5. Lighten up. Avoid expecting too much from others or yourself.**
- 6. Plan at least one Sabbath day a month. No work, no computer, no cell phone, no TV, no I-pod for starters. If you need further guidance on what to do, talk to me. No charge.**
- 7. Realize there's no need to go it alone. Invite others into the process. If anything, you'll have someone to ask you how it's going.**

- 8. Make friends with a good book that nurtures you. Whether the holy book or other spiritual treasures, build these into your library. Did I mention read them?**
- 9. Take care of your body. It's sacred, and the only one we've got.**
- 10. Practice random acts of kindness. Practice kindness, period. A healthy spiritual life is meant to be lived in an outward direction toward the welfare of others.**
- 11. Pay attention. Practice simple ordinary awareness to who and what is around you.**
- 12. Be grateful. For every moment, every day. For life itself.**

I leave you with this: the great South African Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu (affectionately called "the arch") when asked in an interview about his spiritual life he spoke about his wordless prayer, his sense of being in God's presence, which he likened to sitting near a warm stove on a cold morning. "I don't have to do anything," he said. "The fire warms me. I just have to be there, quiet."

Dear friends, may you be blessed with many, many moments by the warm fire. Amen.

Notes:

*The Way of Friendship*; Aelred of Rievaulx; 2001.

*The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World*; 2007.

*New Interpreters Study Bible; New Revised Standard Version*, 2003.

*The Seekers Guide; Making Your Life a Spiritual Adventure*; Elizabeth Lesser, 1999.

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