

KING'S CHAPEL RADIO TALK

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The Rev. Earl K. Holt III

I observed last week that the first thing in the Bible God calls not good is this: It is not good that a man should be alone. In other words human beings are made for relationship.

Many of our relationships are given. Some are socially defined. Most are utilitarian. We are born into a family structure. We get a license to marry and a birth certificate if we have a child. When we enter into a business partnership or other cooperative endeavor a contract is made. And we relate to people for instrumental reasons. We have relationships of a kind with mail carriers, grocery clerks, bank tellers and shop keepers. Perhaps most of our relationships are purposeful in this sense; they serve some ulterior motive, they do not exist merely for their own sakes. But we need people also on a level that is not (in the ordinary sense at least) purposeful. We need others with whom we can simply be ourselves, with whom we can simply be. These are the people we call friends.

Friendship is composed of the elements of knowledge and affection. Of all the elaborate definitions ever offered, I think none is better than this: "A friend is someone who knows us -- and still likes us." Knowledge and friendship are balanced differently in different friendships, and friendships change. As knowledge increases, affection may lessen. Friendships are born, and may also die. A true friend can anger us, hurt us, disappoint us -- in fact we should expect this of our friends since we more deeply involved in their lives -- and the result somehow is only a deepening of the trust which must have been there somehow from the beginning, the trust which a poet has expressed as the comfort of feeling safe:

"Oh, the comfort -- the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person,
Having neither to weigh thoughts,
Nor measure words -- but pouring them
All right out -- just as they are --
Chaff and grain together --
Certain that a faithful hand will
Take and sift them --
Keep what is worth keeping --
And with the breath of kindness
Blow the rest away." (Dinah Maria Mulock Craik)

But it is easy to slip into sentimentality about friendship. A true friendship will not always be easy. A story is told of a man who surprised everyone by saying of an acquaintance of many years who had died that though they were close, and had worked together and vacationed together, they were not

really friends. "What do you mean," others asked, "You laughed and enjoyed so many good times together?" "But we never cried together," was his reply.

{One of my favorite stories about friendship concerns that between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau came of an evening to Emerson's house. They sat side by side before the fire all evening long, reading, ruminating, neither of them saying a thing. When it was time to go, no other words having been exchanged, they thanked each other for a wonderful time, and Thoreau went home. In our noisy world, it is probably even more important to be able to share silence with a friend, though words of course will still be the most common form of exchange.}

Friendships grow in freedom. They are not required to be, they do not have to be, and yet they are. And friendship bestows freedom, the freedom to be ourselves, fully and wholly ourselves, comfortably, with another. Obviously there is no requirement that we have friends. Yet we do. And we have them out of deep need, something deep within us, something essential and human.

Friendships are the least structured, most haphazard, of human relationships. The old saying goes: You're stuck with your relatives, but you can choose your friends. It might be truer to say that life chooses our friends for us, or as Emerson put it in his famous essay on Friendship: "I didn't find my friends, the good God gave them to me." I think he meant it. Friendship is a divine gift. A friend is a gift of grace -- something granted, unbidden, undeserved, unearned, which is wholly for itself.

"Few delights can equal the mere presence of one whom we trust utterly," wrote George MacDonald. To be in such a presence is to be with a friend.

This is Earl Holt, Minister of King's Chapel, located at Tremont and School Streets in Downtown Boston. We invite you to join us for worship on Sundays at eleven o'clock, and to our Mid-week service every Wednesday at 12:15. In the meantime, may you enjoy this blessed day of life, and may you recognize life's blessings for what they are, whenever they come to you.

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