

WILL YOU BE MY FRIEND?

Mister Rogers made friends with his young television audience, or at least he helped build their respect of and trust in an adult for them. This is an aspect of friendship, to trust someone so we can learn from them. The sit-com, “Friends”, which ran on television for about ten years, explored the interactions of three young women and three young men, accenting the misunderstandings, comical interchanges and attempts that go just to be with each other. Many of us could identify with much of their doings as we encounter various relationships in life.

There is a very serious side to friendship. Jesus told his close associates, the apostles, at the Last Supper, “...(L)ove one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” (John, 15: 12-15). This is surely setting the bar high. Friendship, Jesus says, is based on the love and union and relationship in the holy Three-in-One God. Could we possibly say that friendship is the goal of our lives? We are meant to be friends with God and with each other.

How do we work on this in day to day living? Celtic Christians learned that a close friend was needed in order to grow spiritually. They spoke of an “anamchara,” a soul friend. The saying, attributed to Saint Brigid, claims that a person without an “anamchara” is like a person without a head. Early Celts learned they could not be true Christians by going it alone. Someone must accompany us in our spiritual journey. The core issue is the need for real self-knowledge, self-acceptance, self-negation as needed. A friend is an echo, is a mirror to help us know ourselves.

By speaking (either orally or in writing) to another, one expresses and frees one’s own true sentiments and beliefs. We often realize that what takes place in a dialogue is a result that we didn’t realize what was in our heart. So we share ourselves with others. In our individualistic and private culture, this is not an easy thing to do. Openness, truth-speaking, vulnerability, intimacy all defy our culture. We could get ourselves in trouble –and sometimes do. And yet this friendship, which must grow and develop, is at the heart of a good spousal relationship as well as a lasting, on-going friendship.

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One of the possibilities that we fear in opening oneself to a friend is betrayal. I have experienced it in my life. Have you? Something shared in secrecy is divulged to a third party. It is not respected as holy and intimate. Of course, it was experienced by Jesus too who was betrayed by Judas Iscariot. The friendship may be over after a betrayal. Can I then live with the betrayal? Am I strong enough in my own spirit not to be destroyed by a secret shared? Can I forgive the betrayer? If I really know who I am, no one can destroy me no matter what others may say. Perhaps I had to learn my own naïve way of relating.

Friendships can die. They only endure if we work on them and always respect and be truthful to the other person. It is possible to, knowingly or unknowingly, enter into a friendship for the wrong reasons. If you are weak in knowing who you are, it is possible to want a friend whom you can possess and then you might resent your friend having any other friends in their life, the same as in marriage. Twelve Step programs call this co-dependence when you are needy of a friend's exclusive relationship. If you cannot be alone, you will not be a good friend, or member of a community. Friendship must be loving and giving, seeking the growth of the other person.

If friendships can be difficult to form and to keep, why bother? I think it is because we need them. We are not meant to go it alone, in fact can't find our way or even know who we are without others. We need same sex friends and others sex friends. We need different degrees of friendship – school mates, play mates, team mates, pen pals, church affiliates, those we knew years ago and are still friends, and so on. Finding one or two people who are really intimate friends takes time, courage, vulnerability. Friendship with a person is the way to friendship with God. I strive to be a friend with Jesus Christ by getting to know him more deeply. I want his friendship with his Abba. But I have to get there by finding friendship with some people in my life.

Since the pandemic, many people have remained lonely and in need of friendship. I advise anyone uncertain of a friend who seems to like you to act like Mister Rogers and boldly ask that person you want to know and befriend, "Will you be my friend?" Hopefully we will hear the response of the James Taylor song, "You've got a friend."

This is certainly a superficial look at friendship. Do you wish to share something helpful? Write me at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.