

# The Practice of Christian Friendship

BY RUTH E. GROENHOUT

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**A**sk three people to tell you about friendship and you may get three very different responses. One may tell you how meaningful a particular close friendship has been in his life as a source of spiritual and emotional support through difficult times. A second may talk about how friendship, generally, has offered resources for achieving her goals, and the way that she has learned to see God working in and through the various friends that she has been given. A third may talk about the potential dangers of friendship. Her teenager daughter has developed some friendships that are problematic, and she's worried that they may cause her daughter to make decisions that will result in long-term harm. Friendship, she says, is something one has to be careful about.

And, of course, all of these people would be saying something true. Friendship is a complex, variable relationship that can provide us with moral and spiritual support or set us on paths that are deeply destructive. The destructive potential of friendship is linked to its central importance in our lives; because friends are so significant, the wrong types of friendships have the power to do great harm. Yet the solution cannot be to give up on friendship, for it is too important for human life.

Friendship is an underlying theme of numerous stories in the Bible, whether we think of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, Jesus and his beloved disciple, or Paul and Timothy. Most centrally, through Jesus' life

and sacrifice we are made friends with God – which is a rather daunting thought for imperfect created beings like us. The following four books help us examine the nature of friendship and understand why it is one of the paradigm relationships used to depict a Christian life.

#### **THE NATURE OF FRIENDSHIP**

One central puzzle about the nature of friendship arises when we try to put together the love that seems appropriate for friends – a love that is aimed exclusively at particular individuals – and the love to which the gospel calls us, a love that loves friends and enemies equally, extends across boundaries of class and race, and appears completely universal and undifferentiating. Working out the relationship between these two very different pictures of love is Gilbert Meilaender's key project in *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985, 106 pp., \$14.00). While Meilaender recognizes the vital importance of friendship in human life, or, perhaps better, *because* he recognizes the vital importance of friendship, he also sees the dangers it poses (p. 32). Friendship is a gift of God and it can school us in the love we need as a community of Christians. But following a long tradition in Christian philosophy, with notable proponents like Anders Nygren and Soren Kierkegaard, Meilaender cautions us about allowing earthly, particular loves to get in the way of the universal love to which we are called by God. He emphasizes throughout the book that "the tension between particular bonds and a more universally open love...cannot be eliminated" (p. 102). Nevertheless, he offers a cautious endorsement of friendship in its proper place.

In *The Disciplined Heart: Love, Destiny, and Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997, 200 pp., \$22.00), Caroline Simon offers an analysis of love and friendship that draws much more heavily on narrative and creative fiction than Meilaender. Though she (like Meilaender) distinguishes false from true loves (p. 23), Simon focuses more than Meilaender on loves that do what they are supposed to do, that help us become who God created us to be (p. 106). Friendship has a central role to play, she thinks, in the life of contemporary Christians, and it is best understood in light of its connection to the notion of destiny. We are each of us, as created beings, made for a purpose. Various sorts of loves and friendships help us work out that purpose in different ways, and without friendships we cannot become who we were meant to be. Examining in turn neighbor love, friendship, marital love, and non-sexual love between men and women, Simon argues that each form of love contributes in valuable ways to the development of our lives. Mature friends, for example, see us both as we are and as we are capable of being, and they encourage us to become the better version of our selves (p. 105). Left alone, we tend to think we are already perfected; friends love us but still expect better of us, and so we need friends to become who we ought to be. This interdependence is an integral part of our created nature (p. 178).

Simon is less worried than Meilaender about the potential dangers of friendship; she is interested in the ways that friendships are vital for a life that responds to God's calling. I am tempted to attribute the different focus between these two to the difference between Meilaender's Lutheran two-worlds perspective that emphasizes the need to turn away from the world to follow God's call and Simon's Reformed perspective that emphasizes human interdependence and common grace.

In contrast to the two authors above, Paul Wadell does not offer a sustained philosophical analysis of the nature of friendship in *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002, 180 pp., \$16.00). Instead, he starts from the assumption that as Christians we should strive for friendship with God and draws out the implications of that relationship for the structure of our communities and worship (p. 21). Being friends with God, he notes, is not something one does alone; it involves membership in the community of friends of God. We act as the friends of God by meeting together as the community of Christ and engaging in the liturgical practices that shape us into the sorts of friends of God who can act as we should in the world (p. 27). Wadell offers what we might consider a Catholic perspective on friendship, emphasizing how worship done rightly shapes us in ways that go far deeper than mere intellectual assent (p. 129). For example, worship transforms our vision through its use of images, symbols, and metaphors (p. 128). As our vision is transformed, we find ourselves able to see others through Christ's eyes, to see them through eyes shaped by compassion and love rather than arrogance and selfishness, and thus to see them as they more truly are (p. 126).

#### **FRIENDSHIP AS A SCHOOL OF VIRTUE**

I have emphasized how these three thinkers offer contrasting perspectives on friendship, but it is worthwhile noting the ways in which they concur as well. Within our culture friendship is too often portrayed as a facile, sitcom-like affair, where friends are simply any group of folks who hang out together for whatever reason. Meilaender, Simon, and Wadell offer a refreshing alternative; they explore the nature and purpose of deeper friendships and thus help us consider whether the friends we have in our lives are the types of friends we need to cultivate.

Three aspects of friendship stand out in these discussions, all connected with the authors' emphasis on friendship's status as a *practice*—a complex form of human interaction that we need to work at and that involves our following sets of (often unwritten) rules and guidelines. First, both Wadell and Simon emphasize that friendship is a practice with rules and structures that operate independently of our wishes and whims, and one that we can do rightly or wrongly (Simon, p. 189; Wadell, p. 124). Friendship, for example, requires a particular sort of loving attentiveness that sees the other both honestly and charitably, and if this is lacking, the friendship cannot be true.

Many thinkers argue that we become better people by participating in practices that require us to develop the virtues. We do not develop generosity, for example, by simply deciding at some point that we will be generous persons. Rather we become generous by working at it over and over, and friendship is a particularly good location for practicing this virtue. The virtues require more than just choice (though clearly choice is essential)

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because they are a matter of doing generous (or, courageous or honest) things over and over until generosity is ingrained into one's very soul. Practices are the context for this repetitive training. This point is particularly central to Wadell's discussion; he details the way that we become capable of acting as the body of Christ in

the world through engaging in the practices of Christian friendship (p. 67).

So how, specifically, do the virtues needed for a good human life get developed in friendship? Friendships, importantly, require us to learn to displace our own desires and dislikes to some extent and substitute the friend's joys and sorrows. Simon defines good friendship as one in which each friend sees (to some degree) what God calls the other person to become and helps to facilitate that process. Wadell notes that for the Church to act as the community of friends of God it must be a community of folks dedicated to building up rather than attacking each other (p. 110). The day-to-day practice of such other-focused behaviors helps us become persons who exemplify the fruits of the Spirit: gentleness, kindness, and long-suffering.

A third feature highlighted in these texts is the connection between practices and communities. Rather obviously, one cannot be a friend in isolation; it requires at least two people, but usually more. It is in this context that Mother Mary Francis's *But I Have Called You Friends* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006, 109 pp., \$9.95), a series of talks given to the novitiate sisters at the monastery where she served as abbess, really shines. The reflective essays in this book are not intended to be scholarly treatises; they are "conferences," or discussions, she led about how to live in a community as friends. While Wadell and Simon discuss what the nature of friendship is, Mother Mary Francis, P.C.C., focuses on the practical dimensions of developing and sustaining friendships in community. Her advice focuses on the lives of women living in intentional communities, but much of it is directly transferable to the less restrictive communities in which we live and work. While at times marked by somewhat dated gender assumptions (p. 31), her

advice offers insights for those whose work in churches includes facing intractable interpersonal conflicts. *But I Have Called You Friends* respects the complex multiplicities of friendship in close-knit communities where exclusivity can be destructive, but close friendships are vital. Other authors focus on dyadic friendships, ones that include only two people, but friendships involve numerous people, relationships, and personalities, and negotiating these layers of complexity is crucial to a healthy community (p. 20).

### THE PURPOSE OF FRIENDSHIP

A final question about friendship is the question of its purpose or what its goal is. We might be tempted to assume that friendship exists simply for its own sake, but this would be a mistake. While a friendship is properly valued for its own sake, its value is never absolute. When a friendship becomes an absolute end in itself, it can go very wrong. At the very least, it needs to be placed in the context of other common human goods. Wadell makes the strong claim that friendship should ultimately be oriented toward justice (p. 141). In saying this he and Meilaender find themselves more at odds than at any other point in their analyses. Meilaender pictures friendship as an exclusive relationship that always represents a potential conflict with the impersonality that justice requires (p. 77). But Wadell argues that friendship does not conflict with justice, it constitutes a critically important ground of justice because “it is by learning how to seek the good of another in friendship that we gradually acquire the skill to act rightly toward every person with whom we come into contact, respecting their dignity, acknowledging their rights, and fulfilling our responsibilities toward them” (p. 153).

Because Wadell’s paradigm of friendship is the friendship between God and humans, he brings friendship and justice together. To legitimately call ourselves friends of God, he argues, means that we need to embrace God’s projects as our own, and this means that God’s concerns for justice that sound over and over again in Scripture must shape our own concerns as well. Wadell thus continues the practical theme that Mother Mary Francis sounds: friendship must be located in community and not in individualistic accounts of human life. Without justice true community is not possible. Friendship and justice are thus mutually reliant in a vision of a complete shalom that offers wholeness to all people.



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