

"At Your Side,"

13 February 2005

When the message title and theme were set for today, the first thing that came to my mind was something that happened last spring just a few days after my birthday. I was having lunch with Mary Benedict, and as it turned out, it was to be our last lunch ever, for she died unexpectedly just a couple of days later. At any rate, at lunch that day, she gave me a little book that was entitled, "*Thank Heavens for Friends*. Inside, she had written almost like a toast the words, "To friends!"

As the days go by, I have discovered how much I cherish that little book with that inscription. It reminds me of her, and I will always cherish our friendship. I know that many of you feel the same way. And I would also guess that some of you would agree with me that it wasn't always easy having Mary as a friend. Mary had a way of challenging me at times, sometimes in ways I didn't appreciate. Certainly, we didn't always agree, but I was sure of one thing: she wanted the very best for The Garden and the very best for me personally.

In many ways, the friendship we had was a bit like the words that Plutarch once wrote. He said, "I don't need a friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod; my shadow does that much better." One thing was for sure—Mary B was someone I could count on to be at my side, no matter what the fortunes. Thankfully, there are others like that in my life, and I hope in yours, too.

Alban Goodier defined friendship—and I would even define it more broadly as relationship—like this: "A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out." Those are the folks who will be at our side, no matter what. Sometimes it could be a spouse, a life partner, a family member, or a good friend. I recall several years ago now, when a former colleague came back to Indianapolis to conduct the funeral of one of her good friends. One of the things she said during the service was that her friend, and our friend, too, was one you could rely on. She was one who would always "be there." It seems to me that she was talking about the kind of person we're thinking about today—someone who will "be there" for us, someone we will "be there" for, too. We all want and need someone who will be there in the good times and in the bad.

In a very real sense, that's what our Bible passage for today is talking about. This is Jesus talking to his friends the disciples shortly before his death. He is giving them instructions about how to go on, how to live together the best way possible. This is what he said to them: "This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends."

In other words, Jesus was saying to his buddies and to all of us, "Be there for one another." Let's stick with our friends and loved ones; stand by our husband, or wife, or life partner, our son, our daughter, our friends. The way we love as Jesus loved is to be there, no matter what—that's the gift of love. Or as French screenwriter Jean Anouilh would put it: "Love is, above all else, the gift of oneself."

The video clip about Christopher Reeve

Oprah, in her magazine, put it this way: "When the Godiva is gone, the gift of real love is

having someone who'll go the distance with you. Someone who...is willing to share a seat on the bus."

The best kind of love, it seems to me, is a love that begins with friendship. Poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote, "All love that has not friendship for its base is like a mansion built upon the sand." I believe that's true. To have loving relationships, there has to be genuine friendship there. Friendship, at the very least, means liking each other, sharing some things in common, having values that don't conflict. It means wanting to spend time together.

Close friendships and relationships that are built on the kind of love we're talking about this morning mean that each party is willing to be open and vulnerable, and each is trustworthy of confidences that are shared. It means not expecting the other person to be perfect. It's not being so possessive of and compulsive about the relationship to the extent that all other relationships are terminated. Loving as Jesus loves means extending ourselves toward the other, leaving room for the other person to grow and flourish, and be his or her best self. Loving relationships are characterized by honesty, respect and generosity of spirit.

The relationships we're talking about today aren't easy to come by. They don't just happen; we don't find ourselves magically transported into a fulfilling, life-giving, loving relationship. We have to be willing to invest ourselves and work together for the best possible relationship.

Someone has said that it takes a lot of courage to be in this kind of loving relationship, and I suppose that's true. I doubt that many of us think of it that way, but I'm sure there are those who have been badly hurt by a friend in the past, or who have suffered the loss of a love who are afraid to take the risk again. It does take courage to extend oneself to love in the way Jesus said. It is risky business, but it can also have an upside. We will find our lives a bit fuller, more stimulating and more challenging if we're willing to take the risk and take the first step toward love and friendship.

A couple of years ago, I clipped an article out of *O Magazine* about friendship and love. It was written by two psychotherapists who had become best friends. Their names were Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Faith Bethelard, and they explained in the article that they found themselves thinking about the curative power of friendship—the vital relationship, which, they said, Aristotle had once called the mutual love of people who wish each other well.

In the article, they talk about a word, "cherishment." They said that word comes closest to identifying the kind of love and support they were talking about in their friendship. Actually, it's a 17th century word, and it has to do with cherishing and being cherished. I'm going to give you a few seconds to reflect on and maybe even jot down what comes to mind when you hear that word, "cherishment." What do you think of?

The two therapists asked some college students what came to mind for them, and these were some of the things they said. One put it like this: "When I was really, really young my mom sang a song called 'Peace' while she rocked me. Even now when I hum that song to myself, I feel a kind of soothing, but also I am kind of sad and lonely because I miss the safety and protection of her and the song." Another said this about her boyfriend: "Dave gave me roses, which he de-thorned, one at a time. I thought to myself, 'He cares so much for me.'"

The writers delineated the common theme that was underlying all those stories, and it was the experience of feeling cherished, and of being precious to someone. I suppose that's something we all yearn for and hope to experience.

For me, there's something else that's inherent in a loving relationship. That has to do with feeling "OK" in the relationship. I don't like to be in a situation when I feel that I can't be myself, and have to always be careful of what I say or do. It's like walking on egg shells all the time, and that's no fun! I guess I'm really thinking about the kind of relationship that is more relaxed and homey...not so stressful and tension-filled.

English writer and poet put it this way

"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 then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away."

*by Dinah Maria (Mulock) Craik (1826-1887)
from novel: A Life for a Life, 1859*

I guess, to me, that's really the kind of relationships I like, and there's one more thing. I really like being with someone who is on the faith journey with me. That's not to say that we have all the answers and have arrived, but that there's this common bond of spirituality.

I can't help but think that having God as a part of any friendship or vital relationship is a wonderful gift that is irreplaceable. One's faith is such a personal thing, but being able to struggle and question and wonder and wander with another at our side is indeed a blessing.

Perhaps the novelist Gloria Naylor did the best job of summing up what I've been trying to say today. She said, "Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go...And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over." I think she's right, and it's always time to love one another.

Song: "Time After Time"

Closing:

There's so much more that could be said about loving relationships, but there's no way today to do that. Let it suffice to say that God has endowed each one of us with the capacity for being a friend, and for loving one another. Maybe this coming week, with Valentine's Day, would be a good time for us to consider how loving we are with one another.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.