

Love in the Time of COVID, 2: Friendship

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John 15:13

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Text: "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." John 15:13

Benjamin Taylor was a close friend of author Philip Roth through a crucial period in Roth's life, as he produced some of those final masterpieces for which he will be remembered and through his retirement. Toward the end of Taylor's recently published memoir of this friendship, after Roth's death, Taylor writes: "Memory is where the living can rejoin the dead." This comment set me thinking about a friendship of my own.

There were originally three of us in our friendship. Others came and went in its orbit, but at the heart of the friendship for ten years, there were three. Stan, older than me by almost ten years; Scott, younger than me by almost exactly ten years, and me in the middle. The three of us were junior faculty, and were immediately drawn together.

I've often wondered why.

On my first day at the seminary, Stan and I had lunch at the Burger King down the street from the school. Over hamburgers, in our first conversation he told me that they'd have to carry him out of the school feet first. He loved teaching and he'd never leave. In fact, fifteen or so years later, we did carry him out, sadly dead too young. I knew at the end of lunch that we were destined to be friends.

Scott joined the faculty the same summer as I, after having spent a few months at Oxford, his wife Amy and he living in Professor Rowan Williams' home, before Williams became the Archbishop of Canterbury. Scott had studied Wittgenstein at Princeton, a favorite philosopher of mine, and when we met, I quoted a line from Wittgenstein in German. Scott corrected my quote (I had a preposition wrong), and I knew instantly we would become friends.

Why? Why did friendship flourish so quickly with these two.

C. S. Lewis, in his otherwise disappointing book, "The Four Loves," says that friendship is a special kind of love in which the question "Do you love me?" means "Do we care about the same things?" Notice, the question isn't "Do we agree?"

Friends need not agree. But they believe certain things matter. Friends can recall the arguments they had as fondly as the moments of concord. I sure can.

Lewis goes on to say, "That is why those pathetic people who simply 'want friends,' can never make any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends." If a person says, "I really don't care about anything beyond having a friend, the soil is too thin to support the growth of friendship. "Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow-travelers." I think this last metaphor is especially apt. Friends tend to meet up on the road to the same places.

Our friendship was tested. Scott, after a phenomenally successful tenure at the seminary, accepted a call as Senior Minister to Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and subsequently to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. I remained at Austin another seven years after his departure, becoming Dean, later to be called to the presidency of Louisville Seminary.

Our friend, Stan, struggled with both of these changes, the one toward pastoral ministry in a leadership church, the other into seminary leadership. The roles we must play on behalf of the institutions we serve can place a lot of stress on friendships. And the changes that came with my becoming the Dean played havoc with Stan and my friendship. My visits to his office, where his simple coffin (made of wood by Benedictine monks) long stood upright against a wall, the ever-present reminder of the disease that would eventually take his life, were never the same relaxed chatty affairs they had been when we both were professors. There were days when I wondered if we were still friends.

But on the morning, when Stan died of a massive heart attack, the call from his house came, for me to come immediately. I called my friend, Ted Wardlaw to meet me there, and together, at Stan's house, with the undertaker, we lifted our friend into the waiting hearse. Holding Stan in my arms, I knew we had never stopped being friends. We cared about the same things. We were still on the same road.

Scott flew in for the funeral. And the night before, we sat up until much too late beside the pool at our home in Austin, drinking Woodford Reserve, smoking cigars, and remembering. In memory, we rejoined our friend for awhile and gave thanks to God for the gift of friendship with which we had been blessed. Our friend had one of the most brilliant and original minds of his generation and was a teacher of Christian worship beyond compare.

Those who have been blessed with friendship in their lives know the truth of Stoic philosopher Seneca's words: "For what purpose do I make a friend? So that I may have someone for whom to die, someone whom I may follow into exile, against whose death I may stake my own, and pay the pledge."

Those who have been blessed with friendship in their lives see the deep wisdom of Jesus' words to his disciples, "Greater love has no one than this, to die for one's friends."

Whenever the sages of the past spoke of friendship they were unanimous that friends do not use one another. I think it was Marcus Aurelius (maybe?) who said that if someone becomes my friend to profit, they will depart when it no longer profits them. Sages also would agree with C. S. Lewis, that there is something beyond friendship that binds friends together, a magnet's pull toward that for which we care.

I've seen this so many times. My wife Debbie knows more about friendship than I'll ever know. She's the best friend anyone could ever have.

I remember her friendship with a young woman, (they were professors of education together), who shared Debbie's unshakeable conviction that schools exist to educate children for life. It seems that some friendships grow especially well when both your backs are against the wall. In their case, they were fighting foolish, unschooled and short-sighted Texas legislators (of whom there's never been a shortage) bent on gutting schools for political ends. She and her friend reveled in their common battles and wounds right up till the day that we received word one bright summer afternoon while we were vacationing in the cottage we lease in Scotland, that her friend had died in a sky-diving accident.

I don't mean to be morbid. But what I do want us to see, in this age of casual so-called "friending," is that friendship isn't merely acquaintance, it is love.

Which is why, one of the greatest figures in the history of the church, Aelred of Riveaux, understood friendship as our personal participation in the being of God. Friendship is another name for that eternal relationship, that communion of being and becoming we call God. And when we make friends, when we love friends, we are sharing in the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, the self-giving love of the Son, the other-centeredness of the Father. We are tapping into the eternal artery of the oneness in love for which we were all created.

Cicero was a pagan, of course, and not always a shining example of goodness. But he got this right. In this life, the closest any of us are ever likely to be to godliness, is when we love our friends. Greater love has no one, than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Amen