

The Joy of Friendship
Sunday, February 24, 2019

When it comes to love, the English language is impoverished. We have one word to describe our feelings for our significant other, our child, and our best friend – not to mention our favorite activity, vegetable, or vacation spot! The ancient Greeks had 6 words: *eros* – “romantic love”; *storge* – “love for family”; *agape* – “love for everyone”; *philautia* – “love of self;” and *philia* – “deep friendship.” I don’t know what word they would have used for one’s feelings toward broccoli, skiing, or Aruba!

In church we tend to focus most on the first four, with sermons on loving and accepting yourself, strengthening the bonds of community, and caring selflessly for others, rituals around marriage and the dedication of children, and programs for families, but we don’t talk much about *philia* – the love between friends. Yet as I read about this love this week, I found that it is central in ways I hadn’t thought of in many religious and philosophical traditions.

The ancient Greeks and Romans regarded *philia* as perhaps the most important type of love; from it stemmed the ability to offer love in all its other forms. Aristotle, who influenced everyone in the western tradition who followed him, saw three kinds of friendship: friendships that are useful, friendships that are pleasant, and friendships that are complete or true. He wrote about the first two: *These sorts of friendships ... are easily dissolved when the people involved do not remain the same as they were. For if they are no longer pleasant or useful, those who love them will cease to do so. And what is useful [or pleasant] does not remain constant but is different at different times.* Think about your drinking buddies or the people you worked with at a job or on a political campaign – they were friends for a shared need or purpose and when the circumstances changed, those friendships dissipated. Aristotle contrasts complete friendship with those situational friendships. *Complete friendship, he wrote, “is the friendship of those who are good and alike in point of virtue. For such people wish in similar fashion for the good things for each other insofar as they are good, and they are good in themselves.* Complete friendships don’t depend on the circumstances of our lives; they only deepen with time. Those are the ones where when you get together after not having seen each other for months or years, you pick up right where you left off. They are the friendships where you rejoice with each other’s successes without jealousy, and sorrow with each other’s difficulties and failures as if they were your own. Do you have a friend or two like that?

And complete friendships do depend on our seeing the world with at least similar viewpoints and values. You can work with someone with different values to accomplish a goal and consider yourself friends in that sense. You can ski or go to a concert with someone who sees the world differently and still enjoy the activity together and be buddies in that sense, but the friendship which shares hearts and lives has to come from shared values, what Aristotle and later Cicero, in his essay *On Friendship*, called “virtue.” And even more strongly they believe that friendship can only exist between people with good values, because friendships encourage one another to be their best selves, so shared values of greed or white supremacy or the desire for power cannot be the basis of true friendship because those values will never encourage the growth of the best self. There can truly be no friendship among thieves in their view.

The willingness to encourage our friends to choose what is best is so important, that Cicero sees it as the basis of civilization. Without the wisdom and reproof of our friends, we would be less likely to make good choices. He wrote, *Let this, then, be laid down as the first law of friendship, that we should ask from friends, and do for friends, only what is good. But do not let us wait to be asked either: let there be ever an eager readiness, and an absence of hesitation. Let us have the courage to give advice with candor. In friendship, let the influence of friends who give good advice be paramount; and let this influence be used to enforce advice not only in plain-spoken terms, but sometimes, if the case demands it, with sharpness; and when so used, let it be obeyed.*

Sometimes friendship is like a warm blanket – or prayer shawl – but sometimes it’s like sandpaper – rubbing off your rough spots – or like a mirror, helping you to see yourself truthfully.

The Boston rapper Cousin Stizz, who is currently the video voice of the Celtics, talked about his friends’ sandpapering in a recent interview: when he showed his first songs to them, “they told me I was trash...” he said. “But that’s what real friends are for. My real friends were like, ‘Bro’, no.’ But, I ended up getting good. And then they were like, actually, ‘You got something. You might actually got something going for you, so you should probably keep going.” And he did. When have you been sandpapered? When have you offered a mirror to a friend?

Of course sandpaper and mirrors as well as comfort must be offered on both sides of a friendship. If one person is always guiding the other, the relationship is that of mentor and mentee, still a good relationship, but not true friendship. True

friendship offers strengths and weaknesses on both sides. Woody and Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story* are examples of that – the movie isn't about a complete friendship but the development of one as they sand each other's rough spots - Woody learns to deal with his feelings of insecurity and jealousy and Buzz learns to acknowledge his vulnerability and need for support.

They are like the friends the author of *Ecclesiastes* wrote about, each helping the other up when he falls. And from their experiences they develop the three-fold cord of friendship – two people and the love which twines them together.

Some people see that third strand in a friendship as God – when we love, we bring the Source of Love into the relationship. Loves circles continuously between the friends and in the best friendships throws off more love into the world. Many religious traditions believe that friends, more than designated teachers, are best placed to teach one another about the Source of Love.

In the Jewish tradition, for instance, one of the most important aspects of friendship is reading and discussing the Torah together. This study with a friend is called *havruta* and according to the Talmud, studying with a friend is more valuable than studying with a rabbi: *I have learned much from my teachers, but from my friends more than my teachers*, the Talmud says. Resh Lakish was a 2nd century Jewish scholar. His hevruta was his brother-in-law Rabbi Yohanan and the story goes that when they studied together they argued – they were sparring partners with the Torah their ring. The story goes that every time Rabbi Yohanan argued a point, Resh Lakish challenged him twenty-four times. Rabbi Yohanan answered each challenge with his own, until the matter became clear to both of them. After Resh Lakish died, Rabbi Yohanan was inconsolable, realizing that he could not find truth without someone willing to challenge him and sharpen his thinking.

Other traditions may not look as their friends as sparring partners, but spiritual friendship is no less important - Christians share their prayer lives with *Anam Cara* or “friends of the soul.” Buddhists deepen their practice with *kalyàna mitta* or “beautiful friends”, and the Buddha himself said that “noble friendship is the entire holy life.” And though we often think of the purpose of Buddhism to be the individual attaining detachment from sorrow, the Buddha told his followers that meditation cultivated compassion which leads to friendship which circles back to deeper practice and deeper compassion. So friendship creates a continuous loop of love.

I think it's a longing for this kind of loving, spiritual community which brings many of us to church. We come for true friendship which can feed our souls, sharpen our understandings, help us to live into our possibilities, and then offer our greater compassion out to others.

And friendship is a huge need in our town. In so many of my conversations and counseling sessions the same theme comes up – that this is a hard area to make connections if you aren't originally from Scituate. And a hard area to connect with people who share your values.

So my question to you today is: how have you found true friendship here? And how can we create more opportunities for those connections to grow? Sunday morning worship feeds our spirit, but it doesn't necessarily connect us with others. Potluck suppers can connect us; game nights, like the one on Friday, are fun – and help us to see who are the ruthless card sharks among us – looking at you Chuck! – but in addition we need spaces where we come together to know each other more deeply and to encourage each other to think more clearly. Spaces like the Brene Brown group where participants have shared their vulnerabilities and their strengths, or Monday night meditation where participants assist one another into deeper practices, or the Fididdlers, where life stories are shared, or the world religions and bible studies where assumptions were questioned and views expanded. How else can we create spaces for true friendships, both inside and outside of church, to develop? How can we let others outside the church know this is a place where they may find people who share their values and will welcome them? How can we offer more opportunities to share our dreams and our fears, our joys and our setbacks, and to learn from and lean on one another?

- Pamela M. Barz