

FROM THE INTERIM LEAD MINISTER REFLECTION

Easter 6B

John 15: 9-17: "You are my friends ..."

I've loved you so long

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Introduction

There is a cute cartoon that came to life on the Internet after the swine flu virus emerged a few years ago with the caption:

"As the two friends wandered through the snow on their way home, Piglet grinned to himself, thinking how lucky he was to have a best friend like Pooh bear. Pooh thought to himself: "If the pig sneezes, he's dead!"

Humorous and terribly human. Friends and family can both love and fear/hate each other, companionship lives with competition. Leo Tolstoy begins his novel *Anna Karenina* with the words: "All happy families resemble each other, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

This is part of life.

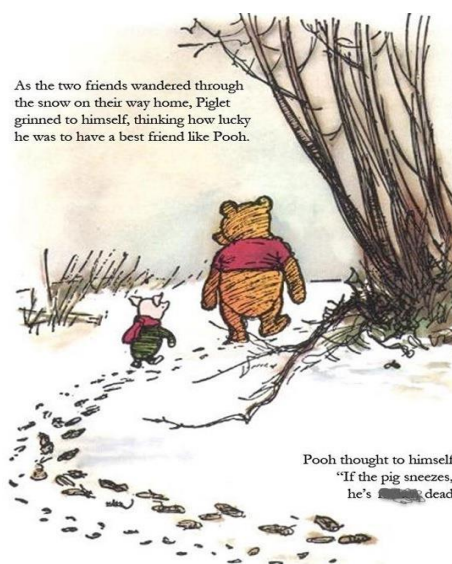
Yet, the challenge here is that we can walk alongside our friends yet live at a great distance from each other. And this because each of our inner lives is inhabited by different discourse: meanings systems shaped by family, culture, socio-economic context, life experience, hopes, desires, and ... fears, and addictions. Pooh Bear gives greater power to phobia than *philos*, friendship; he is afraid that Piglet has the swine flu! The anxious mind unconsciously creates a fantasy that places the other "outside of this world" (Santner, *On the PsychoTheology of Everyday Life*, 40).

So, we walk alongside each other, but how often do we move beyond this fantasy world? We can live in parallel worlds, alongside but greatly distanced from each other. Even friendship lives at a distance.

1. In our reading from John 15: 9-17, John's Jesus describes his relationship with his followers as one of being "best friends". Gail O'Day in the *New Interpreter's Bible* on John writes that John uses the two Greek verbs for "love" (*agapao* and *phileo*) interchangeably ... so when Jesus speaks of friends ["*philos*"] here, he is really saying "those who are loved".

Jesus directs his followers "to abide", "to remain", that is, to maintain a mutual, interdependent relationship with each other, a communion of love. This love and friendship is like the intimate, organic relationship between the vine and the branches. It is to exist in honest recognition of each other regardless of the obstacles, fear, hatred, or competition, or any aspect of our inner discourse that distances the other.

Yet, it seems that his followers may be engaging in the Piglet-Pooh Bear parallel-living without deep reciprocal engagement. William Loader suggests that John is addressing the issue of parallel-living for his own community:



“... a major crisis was developing within John’s community which needed Jesus’ instruction and his prayer - or, at least, the members needed to hear what Jesus would have prayed. The unity was not ‘airy-fairy’, but relational and practical. After the breakdown has occurred in these relations, we read in 1 John that such mutual love needed to express itself in real ways, in sharing material resources, in deed as well as word (1 John 3:17-18).”

2. Friends and members of a family or community can be distanced from each other and exist in parallel living.

In Ian McEwan’s book, *On Chesil Beach*, the teenager Edward becomes distanced from his mother as result of a discourse about her mental health. His mother had been in an accident in which her skull was fractured, dislocating her personality, intelligence and memory (McEwan, 70). At the age of fourteen, his father had chosen to tell Edward that his mother was brain-damaged. This disturbed him, but explained things.

“He had never thought of her as having a condition, and at the same time had always accepted that she was different. The contradiction was now resolved by this simple naming, by the power of words to make the unseen visible. Brain-damaged. The term dissolved intimacy, it coolly measured his mother by public standard ...” (72)

One day she was a loved mother; a conversation later, she was a public category, of lesser humanity and value, a measurement of medical categorisation!

3. In the French film, *I’ve Loved You so Long*, Juliette Fountaine, powerfully played by Kristin Scott Thomas, is a former physician who returns to Nancy after a mysterious fifteen-year absence to live with her younger sister Léa and her husband and children. The reasons provided for her absence are only “awkward euphemisms about long trips, being ‘away’ and the most shattering admission from her long-estranged younger sister, Léa, that their parents told her ‘you no longer existed.’ (Linda Barnard, *Toronto Star*, Nov 07, 2008).



And Lea responds with great emotion to her husband’s cold and calculating demands that she talk to her sister and pressure her to find a place of her own:

“It takes time! It isn’t easy. My parents killed my sister in my mind!” Again, we witness how discourse can produce performative violence, and tear and divide

the world of friends and family.

Enter McEwan’s statement, “the power of words to make the unseen visible”; for Lea, the murder of a loved other is brought to the surface through words making what was not seen visible and so, enabling Lea to test and change her parent’s standards.

“Brittle and unsure of herself, Juliette awkwardly stands to one side, sipping coffee while the family sits at the breakfast table, her status as outsider palpable. Léa is almost desperate to reconnect with her sister, inviting her to outings, dinner parties, the local pool, a weekend in the country. Slowly, tentatively she entices a wary, bitter Juliette to step back into the world, a world Juliette says she realised got along without her very well when she was gone.” (article above, Linda Barnard)

I won't destroy this exceptional movie by telling you any more except that the writer-director Philippe Claudel has produced a moving metaphor about living beyond parallel-living, about negotiating friendship and love. Léa's commitment to a respectful, honest, and brave relationship evidences a Christ-like person. To use psychoanalytic terms, her persistent yet respectful love and friendship intervenes into the dimension of fantasy that structures her sister's inner world and brokenness. She is shutdown and emotionally near death. Yet Léa must also learn how she can reframe her own inner fantasy constructions, in which her parents, over 15 years, nearly destroyed her sister, so that she can become a real friend and companion. Both women are on a journey of ex-change and conversion.

4. Paul writes, "You must speak the truth to one another since we are all parts of one another" (Ephesians: 4:25), another way of imaging friendship. Along with this, we need to speak or discern "the truth" about ourselves and the discourse we inhabit, "the truth" that structures our identity and meaning, which can separate or unite. We avoid this inner "truth", in fact deny it, as it contradicts what our "outward self" thinks it knows, and is very uncomfortable to encounter.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and teacher of the Enneagram, a spirituality process, writes, "your ability to accept me frees me" (Enneagram 2, 4). And again, "... community in the deepest and truest sense, [is] where people are empty enough of themselves to make room for the other, where I hold a place in my heart for the one who is not like me."

Jesus, in our reading today, is inviting us to contemplate what it means that we are deeply connected, as a vine is to its branches, and that each branch shares a common source of life and love with other branches, as equal friends.

Yet to live as equal friends requires an ongoing cultivation process. To abide, to associate with each other as friends, to experience fruitful relationships, requires us to be like Léa: to discover what "words" hold us back from intimacy, with ourselves and with the other. To really love the other even when they push us away, ignore us, and avoid us. Yet, to do this we need to be comfortable with ourselves, to love our "self," to face what we don't like about ourselves. This is what cultivation is about. And prayer and therapy in all its forms is about cultivation, transformation, always for the sake of love that produces communion.

Conclusion

To conclude with the words of Bill Loader on our new equal status with Jesus, as friends, not dependent servants:

Notice also how 15:15 addresses the issue of status. It abandons the imagery of servitude in favour of friendship. While the language of serving and servitude has dominated Christian tradition, this little correction deserves more reflection. Could we say: God does not want slaves; God wants companions? It creates a different model of spirituality. Of course friendship also means letting the other be and acknowledging that otherness in its integrity and sacredness. Certainly there is no thought of 'pocketing' God or Jesus in a way which reduces either - a kind of power-play which makes them manageable (pocket-able and in my control). Some people either want to dominate or be dominated. The model here is different. It does not compromise the integrity or holiness of the other, but affirms companionship in such holiness.