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Texts: Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

John 15:12-15

The Parting of Friends

In the summer of 2006, I joined Facebook. I was at a leadership conference, and I was looking forward to staying in touch with all the new friends I made. Using a website where we could simply affirm that friendship with a click of a button felt awesome. As it turns out, I was one popular guy!

Then Facebook got weird. Photos of these friends I met only briefly started to pop up in my feed. I loved the vacation candids, but did I really need to see a picture of their Panera Cobb Salad? No, no, I did not.

Of course, there were and still are all sorts of annoying and even nefarious things happening on Facebook. A few years ago, Facebook even made a commercial apologizing for their misdeeds and begging people to give them another chance. Why? Because of your friends. Facebook magnanimously recommitted to connecting you with the people you weren't sure you liked in the first place. Whenever I log in, I can't help but wonder what it even means to be friends at all.

While unfriending someone on Facebook can be awkward, saying goodbye to friends in reality can be just plain hard. You don't know if or when you will see them again. There are things you want to thank them for and apologize for. And, there are so many memories. Where do you even begin?

A little over a year ago, I went to visit Ken Taylor when he was very sick at Hartford Hospital. He knew he was not long for the earth, still he looked me square in the eye and announced, "You and I are going to be good friends." Given the type of person Ken was, I could not help but interpret what he told me theologically.

When Jesus says, "I call you my friends" in the Gospel, he invites us all into a friendship that is both inclusive and rich. We discover our commonality in our shared commitment to lifting up those who have fallen, including ourselves from time to time. Ever since that visit with Ken, the imagery of a church as a community of friends has stuck with me. Perhaps you may have noticed it in my correspondence or in our liturgies.

Friendships in Christ can be more than sentimental. Because we have a common friend in Jesus, we can hold one another to his standard of justice. When we are not of one mind, we can trust in one another's good intentions. We can forgive, and we can receive the forgiveness of others. We can speak our truth in love and transform our community, even the world.

Perhaps best of all, friends in Christ can have so much fun together. Some of my favorite moments at First Church were filled with laughter. How could I ever forget a Deacons' Meeting when I asked the group what in the world truly bothers them? What keeps them up at night? Without hesitation, one esteemed deacon replied totally deadpan, "My prostate." We nearly fell out of our chairs laughing. What a wonderful reminder that we were indeed sitting in the Friendship Room. As friends in Christ, we can be serious about our mission without being self-serious.

When the great 19th century writer, teacher, and preacher John Henry Newman left his long-time church in Oxford, England, he delivered a sermon entitled, "The Parting of Friends." The text ends with a beautiful reflection as to how friends in Christ might best leave one another. It reads:

"O loving friends, should you know any one whose lot it has been, by writing or by word of mouth, in some degree to help you thus to act; if he has ever told you what you knew about yourselves, or what you did not know; has read to you your wants or feelings, and comforted you by the very reading; has made you feel that there was a higher life than this daily one, and a brighter world than that you see; or encouraged you, or sobered you, or opened a way to the inquiring, or soothed the perplexed; if what he has said or done has ever made you take interest in him, and feel well inclined towards him; remember such a one in time to come, though you hear him not, and pray for him, that in all things he may know God's will, and at all times he may be ready to fulfil it."

I hope you pray for me as I leave for a new ministry. I will most certainly pray for you. That's what friends in Christ do. Amen.

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