

September 22, 2013  
Claire Feingold Thoryn  
Theme: Relationships  
Sermon: Silver and Gold

**First Reading: Rev. Max Coots “The Vegetable Prayer” (edited)**

Let us give thanks for a bounty of people.  
For children who are our second planting,  
and though they grow like weeds  
and the wind too soon blows them away,  
may they remember fondly where their roots are.  
For generous friends with hearts as big as hubbards,  
and smiles as bright as blossoms;  
For feisty friends as tart as apples;  
For continuous friends, who, like scallions,  
keep reminding us that we’ve had them;  
For crotchety friends, as sour as rhubarb and as indestructible;  
For funny friends, as silly as brussel sprouts  
And serious friends, as complex as cauliflowers and as intricate as onions;  
For friends as unpretentious as cabbages  
and friends, like parsnips, who can be counted on to see you through the winter;  
For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening-time  
And young friends coming on as fast as radishes;  
For loving friends, who wind around us like tendrils and hold us, despite our blights,  
wilts, and witherings;  
And, finally, for those friends now gone, but who fed us in their times that we might have  
life thereafter;  
For this bounty of friends, we give thanks.

**Second Reading: Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Friendship”**

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken. ...How many persons we meet  
..., whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honor, and who honor us! How many we  
see in the street, or sit with in church, whom, though silently, we warmly rejoice to be  
with! Read the language of these wandering eye-beams. The heart knoweth.

I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends, the old and the new. Shall  
I not call God the Beautiful, who daily showeth himself so to me in his gifts? I chide  
society, I embrace solitude, and yet I am not so ungrateful as not to see the wise, the  
lovely, and the noble-minded, as from time to time they pass my gate. Who hears me,  
who understands me, becomes mine, — a possession for all time. [N]ature... gives me  
this joy...and thus we weave social threads...a new web of relations; and, ...we shall by  
and by stand in a new world of our own creation, ...no longer strangers and pilgrims....

My friends have come to me unsought. The great God gave them to me. ...[T]he [God] in me and in them derides and cancels the thick walls of individual character, relation, age, sex, circumstance...and now makes many one.<sup>1</sup>

**Sermon: Silver and Gold**

“I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends, the old and the new.”

“Let us give thanks for a bounty of people.”

What a pleasure to share Emerson’s words in a sanctuary where he himself once stood and preached!

In keeping with our monthly theme of relationships, this morning I’ll delve into the rich, complicated, joyful and difficult world of friendship. What does our faith tell us about friendship?

Let’s go way back. I turned to the Bible to see if there were any good stories about friendship in there. There are two stories that are often used as examples of biblical friendship. Both are from the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament.

The first is the story of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi’s husband and sons die, leaving Naomi alone with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Orpah returns to her birth family. Ruth does not, and pledges to Naomi:

‘Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
(Ruth 1: 16-17 NRSV)

Let’s just say Ruth got along far better with her mother-in-law than many people do.

Ruth and Naomi, as single women living many thousands of years ago, could have ended up destitute. But together, they find a solution. An ancient Biblical law worked in their favor. The law says that if a man dies and leaves a widow, his closest male relative has to marry the widow. (We don’t follow that law much now! That’s one of those Biblical laws that most Bible literalists would like to pretend doesn’t exist.) Naomi finds a distant male relative named Boaz. Boaz does his duty and marries Ruth, saving both women from poverty and distress.

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<sup>1</sup> From “Friendship.” Edited to be read more naturally aloud. This essay is in the public domain, online at <http://www.emersoncentral.com/friendship.htm>.

Ruth's great-grandson, David, is part of the other well-known Bible story about friendship. In fact, the story of David and Jonathan is often used as the example of true friendship...but it might be a little more complicated than that.

Their story starts after young David slays the terrible Goliath. David is welcomed as a hero into King Saul's palace. Saul's son, Jonathan, locks eyes with David. In that moment, the Bible says: "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1). As they become ever closer, they exchange gifts and kisses.

And then tragedy strikes. Jonathan is killed in war, and David cries out at his funeral: "greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Samuel 1:26). Biblical scholars have done close analysis of the text, and several have concluded that Jonathan and David were more than just friends. It is really a story about true love.

So when it comes to a spiritual understanding of friendship, friendship without the added factors of family or romance, the Bible doesn't have a clear message.

When Emerson wrote his essay on friendship, he had probably read another famous essay on friendship written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, around 1580, by Michel de Montaigne.<sup>2</sup> In it, Montaigne lovingly describes what he believes makes a true friendship. His best friend, who inspired the essay, was a man named Estienne, and Montaigne had only known him for four years before Estienne died. Yet their friendship was so honest and inspiring that Montaigne said mournfully, the years after his friend's death were "nothing but smoke, an obscure and tedious night."

Montaigne begins his essay by saying there is no reason for anyone to have a close friendship with a sibling or family member. He says, "The father and the son may be of quite contrary humours, and so of brothers: he is my son, he is my brother; but he is passionate, ill-natured, or a fool." He argues that friendship is all the more special in that it is chosen freely.

Montaigne is a man of his times, so when he speaks of friendship, he makes it very clear that he is speaking of friendship between two men. He doubts a woman's ability to have a long and meaningful relationship. To quote, women do not: "appear to be endued with constancy of mind, to sustain the pinch of so hard and durable a knot."

But once Montaigne has finished discounting all family members and women from the possibility of friendship, he has some beautiful things to say. Of his departed friend, he says, "If a man should [ask] why I loved him, I find it could no otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I."

As Montaigne knew, when we risk loving our friends, we risk the pain of losing them. Kay Lamer told me about the friendships she has built with members of our partner

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<sup>2</sup> While there is a wonderful Penguin edition of Montaigne's essay, I used the free Project Gutenberg online edition. <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/3/5/8/3586/3586.txt>

church in Transylvania. When she first visited in 2011, she stayed with a family of four: a couple named Ibolya and Elemer; their daughter Iby and granddaughter Blanka. When she returned this summer, the family of four had become a family of three: Elemer had died. Ibolya asked her visiting friends to join her at his graveside to water the flowers. It was an honor to share in this ritual. Kay wrote: “Maybe that’s the true meaning of a congregational relationship, sharing not only in the dreams and aspirations...but honoring our shared grief as we mourn [our] loss.”

Emerson’s essay from our second reading describes his ideal friendship. It doesn’t seem that Emerson had a special friend like Montaigne. Emerson was a wonderful writer and speaker but he was awkward and very shy in person. As he said, “I embrace solitude.” He envisioned perfect friendships but said he was comfortable with a friendship being one-sided—worshipping someone from afar, even writing letters to someone who never writes back, and simply basking in the glow of their genius from a distance, so that their flaws are never revealed. It is a solitary man’s view of friendship. He wrote: “the [more] we demand of friendship, of course the less easy to establish it with flesh and blood. We walk alone in the world. Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and fables.”

Even in his loneliness, he had a vision of what deep friendship can be. He says there are two requirements to make a true friend: One, you must be able to be completely sincere with your friend, able to speak the truth of your heart absolutely and unashamedly. Second, there must be tenderness between you, a sense of caring, gentle affection. This tenderness will make a friendship fit for, as he says: “serene days, and graceful gifts, and country rambles, but also for rough roads and hard fare, shipwreck, poverty, and persecution.” He also wrote: “I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass...or frost..., but the solidest thing we know.”

Emerson also said, famously, that “the only way to have a friend is to be one.” A friend will be tell you what they really think, honestly and kind. He wrote, “Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo.”

Every friend, however ideal, will eventually show their “blights, wilts and witherings.” Emerson wrote: “Our friendships hurry to short and poor conclusions, because we have made them a texture of wine and dreams, instead of the tough fibre of the human heart.”

He might have liked this story. My husband Ben and his best friend Mike met when they were a few days old. Ben and Mike grew up together, they commuted and worked together at the same school for a while, and until this past summer, our families lived together in a two-family house. The joke has been that while I may be married to Ben, it is Mike who is Ben’s true life partner. But they have had their disagreements.

When they were about 8 years old, Ben and Mike were playing together in Ben’s driveway. Ben had a hammer, and they were hitting caps with the hammer to make them explode. Well, Mike started to get a little bossy...and Ben yelled something rude at him. They started to fight, and Mike grabbed Ben by his long blond hair—this was back when

Ben had hair. Mike was bigger, so he was swinging Ben around by the hair, but...Ben was holding the hammer. He brought that hammer down hard on Mike's head. Mike let go and ran away yelling, Ben chased him until he got to Prospect St. which he wasn't allowed to cross without an adult.

Mike made it home, holding his head the whole way, and his family screamed when they saw him—he had blood on his head, on his hands, on his shirt...but it turned out it wasn't serious. He got bandaged up, and later Mike's mom Barbara brought Mike back over to Ben's house. Ben and Mike apologized to each other. Then they ate fish sticks and watched tv. Best friends still and always...bloody head wounds notwithstanding.

A good friend cares for us, nettles us, and above all, loves us, even when we mess up.

When Wilbur the pig first met Charlotte the spider, he was shocked by her bloodthirsty ways. He soon learned that she was actually a kind and thoughtful being. Charlotte saved Wilbur's life by writing words in her web about him: "Terrific." "Radiant." "Humble." In her last days, Wilbur asked Charlotte why she had given him so much, when he had not given her anything. Charlotte replied:

You have been my friend. That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my web for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that.<sup>3</sup>

"I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends, the old and the new."

"Shall we not call God Beautiful, who daily shows us the face of the divine in the faces of our friends?"

Thus we weave a new web of relations; no longer strangers and pilgrims—  
But friends.

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.

May we share our kind words with all those we have silently rejoiced to be with.

May we be truthful and tender, and may we find that in being a friend, we have many.

Let us give thanks for a bounty of people.

*Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*, 104