

How Things Have Changed: The New Friendship

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Greeting, Centering
Kindling
Opening Words

We are here
together to celebrate our lives
in the spirit of love
that we might befriend again
our ancient vision
of a just and kinder world.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Story

This is a true story of two great friends, a baby hippopotamus named Owen and a 130 year old giant Tortoise named Mzee. (EMzay) Now, the hippo was not *always* friends with Mzee. He wasn't always famous. Here is how it happened.

Owen lived with his pod, the hippopotamus family. There were about twenty of them. They didn't welcome strangers, that is stray hippos, into their pod because hippos are very clannish, that is, they don't welcome anyone that doesn't look like their own family. And very few other animals mess with the hippo pod – they are very big – some of them weigh 8000 pounds!

One day, a very sad thing happened. A giant wave called a tsunami hit the coast of Kenya, and many villagers by the beach lost their boats and houses. But the pod of hippos near the village was the worst off. They were all washed away except for one baby. Because a man named Owen helped to save him, they named the baby after him. The people who rescued him couldn't bring him to another pod, since they wouldn't accept him, even though he was a baby hippo. He wasn't one of theirs. So they took him to a wild animal park in Kenya, and put him in a place with mud (which hippos love) and running water and a few other animals, including a very old tortoise name Mzee. Owen went right up to Mzee and lay down beside her. Mzee hissed at Owen, but Owen wouldn't move. In the morning, the men and women who ran the park found Owen snuggled up against Mzee. And from that time on, slowly the 600 lb baby mammal and the 130-year-old reptile became friends. They ate together, slept near each other, and learned to trust each

other. They like to swim together, play follow the leader together, and they even rub noses sometimes, to show how much they like each other.

The animal experts have tried to explain this odd friendship, but in the end, they can't agree, since tortoises like to live by themselves and are not social, and hippos definitely only hang out with hippos. But what they can't explain, the heart already knows: sometimes our most important friends are those we least expected.

Sequence:

Known and unknown. Public and Private.

A beloved singer dies. Magazines feature her portrait on their covers, Facebook and YouTube tributes overflow. Real tears flow.

The 12 year old orphan in Kenya who dies of AIDS is on the cover of nothing, and the tributes are quiet prayers by the last nurse to attend him.

Sister and brothers, both, the famed and forgotten.

Women who want to tell the stories of their own lives, speak aloud of their own health, are shut down and kept from microphones by calculating men, and it hits the news. The 16 year old girl who is pregnant by a forcible family member is ashamed to tell anyone, and keeps a private and terrified silence.

Sisters all, those in the news, those unnamed.

A French soldier serving in Afghanistan goes back home and everyone knows his name and hometown. A young child shot accidentally by one of the village militia near him is simply buried first in the ground and then in a box of statistics. *Brothers both, those acclaimed in the papers, those reduced to a number.* Oh Love, as a Universalist I proclaim that a ligament of spirit, of common humanity, ties me to all people whether I hear about them or not, since their lives are as important to them as my life is to me.

Love, open a window in my heart now, and let the silence that touches everyone who ever lived, rest there for a time right now.

silence

Sitting in a place of shared and famous stories which can be told and retold does not mean we do not have a private inner life with stories that are only our own. Mindful of that, we are free for a moment to lift up, either within or whispered aloud, the names of those who embody our griefs, our loves, our losses, our struggles, our hopes.

naming

Whether the tune is famous or heard for the first time, good music is a gift that we can never tire of opening. Receive the gift in gladness.

Music/Anthem

Readings:

The First Reading *this morning comes from a most excellent essay by Christine Rosen, written in 2007 in New Atlantis Magazine, a journal of Technology and Society.*

For centuries, the rich and the powerful documented their existence and their status through painted portraits. A marker of wealth and a bid for immortality, portraits offer intriguing hints about the daily life of their subjects—professions, ambitions, attitudes, and, most importantly, social standing. Such portraits can be understood as “painted anthropology,” with much to teach us, both intentionally and unintentionally, about the culture in which they were created.

Self-portraits can be especially instructive. By showing the artists both as they see their true selves, and as they wish to be seen, self-portraits can at once expose and obscure, clarify and distort. They offer opportunities for both self-expression and self-seeking. They can display egotism and modesty, self-aggrandizement and self-mockery.

Today, our self-portraits are democratic and digital; they are crafted from pixels rather than paints. On social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook, our modern self-portraits feature background music, carefully manipulated photographs, stream-of-consciousness musings, and lists of our hobbies and friends. They are interactive, inviting viewers not merely to look at, but also to respond to, the life portrayed online. We create them to find friendship, love, and that ambiguous modern thing called connection. Like painters constantly retouching their work, we alter, update, and tweak our online self-portraits; but as digital objects they are far more ephemeral than oil on canvas. Vital statistics, glimpses of bare flesh, lists of favorite bands and favorite poems all clamor for our attention—and it is the timeless human desire for attention that emerges as the dominant theme of these vast virtual galleries.

Although social networking sites are in their infancy, we are seeing their impact culturally: in language (where *to friend* is now a verb), in politics (where it is *de rigueur* for presidential aspirants to catalogue their virtues on MySpace), and on college campuses (where *not* using Facebook can be a social handicap). But we are only beginning to come to grips with the consequences of our use of these sites: for friendship, and for our notions of privacy, authenticity, community, and identity. As with any new technological advance, we must consider what type of behavior online social networking encourages. Does this technology, with its constant demands to collect (friends and status), and perform (by marketing ourselves), in some ways undermine our ability to attain what it promises—a surer sense of who we are and where we belong? The Delphic oracle’s guidance was *know thyself*. Today, in the world of online social networks, the oracle’s advice might be *show thyself*. “Friendship” in these virtual spaces is thoroughly different from real-world friendship. In its traditional sense, friendship is a relationship which, broadly speaking, involves the sharing of mutual interests, reciprocity, trust, and the revelation of intimate details over time and within specific social (and cultural) contexts. Because friendship depends on mutual revelations that are concealed from the rest of the world, it can only flourish within the boundaries of privacy; the idea of public friendship is an oxymoron.

The Second Reading *comes from Ignazio Silone's 1942 novel "The Seed Beneath the Snow." Silone's books made a big impact on me when I was in seminary.*

The man named Bastiano is talking to his mother.

“Excuse me, Ma, but you don’t seem to understand the world we are living in. There’s no private life any more, and even the peasant on the land is a sort of employee who can’t work without permission. And then, I’m not old enough to turn into a hermit; I need to see people. Really you must excuse me, but you do seem to be living in another world.”

“Have you no friends, my boy?”

“Friends?” Now I see that you want to make me laugh. There’s been no such thing as friendship in our part of the world for a *long* time, Ma; haven’t you noticed? What we have now is ‘connections.’ Yes, that’s the word: ‘connections.’ Let’s not close our eyes to what’s happening around us – yes, right here in our own part of the country. For the first time, perhaps in the whole history of this land, ‘connections’ have taken the place of friendship. I’m sorry, there’s no such thing as friendship around here any more.”

Sermon

I confess that I’m a suspicious type. And I have not given up my immediate, and severe, suspicions and reservations about the social networks. You know, like MySpace, Friendster, Facebook and so many more. Mostly, my suspicions bit me when I noted that if I joined Facebook, someone I barely know, or don’t even know at all, could be my “Friend.” The image that came to me as I read more and more about Facebook, for example, frightening. I could see the path I’ve deliberately taken most of my life – the path of friendship – suddenly slanting off in a totally different direction, depositing me into a flat, un-flowered field with thousands of people I don’t really know crying out “Welcome, friend!” as they busy themselves commenting wryly on my day to day life, which for some reason I have made visible on the network. The image gave me chills.

I know many of my colleagues do not recoil from this new way of communicating as I do. Email, I hear from them, is almost entirely passé. This is the new way. Best get with it. Most of my colleagues, and indeed, many people in this congregation (and every other congregation I can think of) accomplish *good* things with Facebook especially, communicating urgent news quickly, getting swift news about people’s health which they can communicate to the lead ministers or pastoral team. All of this is terrific and I admit it. And although not being on Facebook does tend, I hear, to slow my communication with many young adults, for whom Facebook has been a norm for some years now, I don’t think this is really “a generational thing” either. While it’s true that the five year old girl I was sitting next to at a dinner after a Memorial I conducted this week taught me things about my up-to-date iPhone I never knew nor imagined (because she has grown up with such savvy technology from birth). I know plenty of people in their 70s and 80s who enjoyed mastering iPhones and the social networks to keep up with distant grand-children, and they seem to have got the hang of it pretty fast. No, it’s not because I’m older, it’s because I’m me.

So I’m just exploring my *own* reservations here, which rise from reflecting on the journey of my own life of 62 years. In other words, I am thinking out loud here – for myself – but, hopefully

prompting each of you to reflect on your own patterns of friendship. And contemplative self-questioning is never a bad thing to do anyway.

I told you that the strained usage of the word “friend” is the main focus of my suspicion. I suppose that this is because it's the most grounded way I've been moving through the world for these last 50 years. I've been deliberate about being open to friendship, including surprising ones, and I've dedicated a lot of my days to the cultivation of deep relationships with friends I've grown to love.

The story of Owen and Mzee this morning suggests that something like friendship is found even outside the human community. They are different, not alike, yet they become friends. I've witnessed dogs and cats, historic enemies according to folklore, relating to each other as friends in their common house, at least according to human interpretation. I especially like the last line in the story: *Sometimes our most important friends are those we least expected.*

I know that every individual in this room has a history of friendship in their lives. Some find it hard to make friends, and value them very much when they do. Some have maintained long friendships since childhood, from Kindergarten even. Others, because they moved around so much as children, developed the skills, either of making new friends fast, or choosing only one or two friends they could communicate with even if they were at a distance. Some find their friendships in their relationships to spouse or even in-laws. I know one woman whose best friend had married her ex husband and they all vacationed together. And friendships of a deeper kind can, yes indeed, be cultivated despite great distance with the help of technology: e-mails, Skype – just wanted to be sure you understand I'm not being a luddite here, hopelessly crabbed and cranky about all things that glitter. I admit that technology – in any age – has given us all many, many boons. I know my own friendship with Bonni Carryer down in Chile was almost entirely based on a very effective, if older technology: long-hand written letters delivered by planes when she and her husband were working in the deserts of Algeria, and then the jungles of Mozambique. I never went to either country, or spent any time with her in person for over 20 years. Yet our friendship deepened only because of the technology of airmail.

Three friendships in my life have developed almost immediately, without any slow buildup. I am thinking of my friends Doug Robson in California, William Green in San Antonio, Michael Buck in Cincinnati, and my Columbus friend Andrzej Baranski. One conversation with each of them, and we were drawn onto the bright path of friendship, which we have walked together. Other friendships developed because we had important work to do together – Richard Sinkoff and I took care of his partner (and my best friend) Stefan Mistler for a year before he died. We had known each other of course, and I liked him, but I think friendship is something deeper than just “liking” somebody. We became friends by shouldering the responsibility of going to doctor visits and hospital tests with Stefan, and cooking for him, or just sitting with him as he suffered. This week, on Valentine's Day, we marked the 17th anniversary of Stefan's death; Richard cooked a kosher supper out in San Francisco for friends who both knew Stefan and didn't know him, and I wrote and emailed a portrait of our friendship that Richard read at the dinner. Me, I lit the yahrzeit (or anniversary) candle, read *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer of mourning, and wept in my office. 17 years, 17 minutes – the heart of friendship and love scarcely knows the difference.

Like Owen and Mzee, Stefan and I were very different from each other and had almost nothing in common – but our friendship was a gift to us both.

Some folks have the emotional make-up to befriend many people, and maintain and cultivate those friendships. Others are so made that they prefer to call few people their dear friends, and share nothing intimate with acquaintances. There can be no rules about this, because we are all different of course. One approach is not better than the other, either.

Since it's Presidents' Day weekend, I'll quote the presidents of the holiday to support what I just said. President Washington, for instance, kept few friends, but they were important to him. Here are his elegant words. This is from a letter to Bushrod Washington on the 15th of January, 1783: *Be courteous to all, but intimate with few, and let those few be well tried before you give them your confidence. True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation.*

But unlike Washington, Abraham Lincoln used the word *friend* so often and so freely that it seems to have been one of his favorite words. He even called his bitter opponent Stephen Douglas "my good friend," and he meant it. In 1849 he even wrote this summary sentence to his friend Joseph Gillespie: *The better part of one's life consists of... friendships.* And Lincoln really cultivated many, many friendships, including, he once wrote, "friendship with myself," which he deemed most important of all.

But despite the broad continuum in friendship practice between Lincoln and Washington, I thought it best to offer a definition of friendship to balance both poles. I found this recently while reading Christine Rosen's observations that you heard earlier. *Friendship is a relationship, which, broadly speaking, involves the sharing of mutual interests, reciprocity, trust, and the revelation of intimate details over time and within specific social (and cultural) contexts. Because friendship depends on mutual revelations that are concealed from the rest of the world, it can only flourish within the boundaries of privacy;* and then she adds: *the idea of public friendship is an oxymoron.* She writes that admittedly opinionated last sentence because she shares with me a suspicion of using the word *friend* to mean anything which does not begin with respect for nurturing boundaries of privacy.

Ignazio Silone's novel "The Seed Beneath the Snow" was written in 1942 as a sequel to his great novel *Bread and Wine*. Long before computers, websites, and social networks, in the days of Mussolini and war, Silone was bemoaning the thinning out of the concept of friendship. "*There's been no such thing as friendship in our part of the world for a long time, Ma; haven't you noticed? What we have now is 'connections.'* Yes, *that's the word: 'connections.'* *Let's not close our eyes to what's happening around us – yes, right here in our own part of the country. For the first time, perhaps in the whole history of this land, 'connections' have taken the place of friendship.*"

Again, these are strong and critical words, but they are worth reflecting on.

In some ways, long before I was reading novels by Silone or essays by Rosen, I was reflecting on this whole idea of friendship, and pretty much all the time as I made friends and lost them. I think I rather agree with President Lincoln that reflecting on friendship has defined my life. There were times in my childhood when I had few friends, or lost friends due to the overwrought emotions that seem to permeate many of us when we're middle-school age. I had to thread my way through neighborhood "friends" who were more bullies than real friends, or who were hard-to-decipher "fair-weather friends," or even some that I myself turned from when I was a teen, because no one had ever told me you might be erotically attracted to someone you've called a friend. That scared me to death, since in that era I didn't know how to deal with such confusing realities as I do now. But even then I knew that friendship was an almost sacred concept, because in church I heard that the teacher Jesus himself called his students "friends." I even heard that one religious group called the Quakers was actually called "The Society of Friends" after that statement attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John. Such things made me realize how profound friendship must be.

Ms. Rosen's worries about the new friendship are worth considering, I think. She raises many thoughtful questions. Like Silone, she thinks that many of the social sites are more about "connections" than necessary friendships, and she uses Silone's exact word. She further asks: *Does this technology, with its constant demands to collect (friends and status), and perform (by marketing ourselves), in some ways undermine our ability to attain what it promises—a surer sense of who we are and where we belong? The Delphic oracle's guidance was **know thyself**. Today, in the world of online social networks, the oracle's advice might be **show thyself**.*

I know that a surprisingly large number of people in this congregation are mourning because of sick friends, or friends who died this week. These were not small photos of semi-strangers on a social network page, but people with whom they shared supper at holidays, people with whom they shared the intimacies of the heart during the week. They are grieving deeply, and will for some time. As I said, 17 years later, I am still weeping for my best friend Stefan. I understand.

Oh, I suppose there is a chance I might get over my suspicion one day and get onto some social network – after all, some of you know how long I resisted getting a cell phone, and now I am using my iPhone several hours each day. I guess I can be worn down eventually and perhaps "catch up" with the rest of culture. But right now, I'd rather spend my time cultivating friendships in real time, face to face where possible, reflecting on the spiritual nature of my life in terms of friendship, and finding my center and strength in the love. What might you be doing?

Offering:

Blest is the privilege we claim, to support a congregation where there can be no fencing of thoughts and no denial of dignity to any human being. Such a church has an important role to play in a world that grows stingier every day in love, friendship and peace. May we support such a church gladly and with generosity.

Prayer: *Ssapó ómahk sika, a First Nation leader we call by the English translation Crowfoot, offered this amazing question and a set of answers as his last words as he lay dying.*

“What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow, which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.” To which I add, it is the briefest flash in the eye of a friend who gets it, a mourning cloak butterfly dancing around the first lilacs and then flying away, the salt of tears fading on the cheek, the disappearing halo around the moon, and the gossamer of the milky way you see for a second from the corner of your eye. Let us befriend the world of our lives, and notice it, and be glad for it. Let peace and brightness now take us deeper into those lives in peace.

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