



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Friendship's Role in Coming to Know as We Are Known
(*Friendship*, pp. 67-75)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Friendship's Role in Coming to Know as We Are Known

The best friendships are rooted in personal, even intimate, knowledge. From a Christian point of view, a true friend's endorsement of one's own self-conception does not stem just from personal loyalty; it must be based on insight into one's true self—the self rooted in God's intentions for one's life.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 18:1-5

Meditation[†]

This is the meaning of the proposition that we can meet others only through the mediation of Christ. Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Reflection

The Bible depicts Jonathan's great love for David as an intimate bond: "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1). Likewise, the philosopher Aristotle described a friend as "another self" and the most significant friendships as "one soul in two bodies."

Caroline Simon agrees that friendship involves an intimate bond. "In loving my friend, my self expands and is enriched by his accomplishments and delights," she says. "This expansion of self is not selfish; the expansion of self involved in friendship is also costly. Sorrows double, not just joys, for my friend's suffering becomes my own. The compassionate suffering that is part and parcel of friendship, costly and painful as it can be, deepens our humanity. Places in our hearts that did not previously exist are created by compassion for our friends and loved ones."

She highlights three aspects of the love between true friends:

- ▶ *Friends have insight into one another's true self.* One of the best things about friendship is that "friends can help each other see themselves more clearly." Through their loving vision, good friends can see not only who we are "warts and all," but also what we aspire to be. "As a Christian, I believe that our true selves (the selves that we are destined but not fated to become) are rooted in God's intentions for us," Simon writes. Because our friends care for us, they encourage and help us grow into our true selves.
- ▶ *There is equality between friends.* Ideally friends have "mutual affirmation, mutual self-disclosure, caring and the sharing of activities and sorrows, along with mutual admonition and advice giving." But what if my friend has more insight into God's plan for my life than I do? The friend will need "patience, humility, and prayer, lest the equality and mutuality essential to friend-



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ship dwindle” and their correction become “unduly wounding or...paternalistic,” Simon writes. “Knowing when to speak and how to speak as a friend demands wisdom and skill. One wants to give one’s friend the benefit of the kind of insight only a friend can furnish; yet one wants the story that one’s friend lives out to be his own.”

- ▶ *Friends share intimate knowledge.* They may “disclose thoughts and feelings to one another that they would be unwilling to reveal to mere acquaintances.” And they can communicate by nonverbal *intimation*: “I can know my friends’ unspoken thoughts because I have seen them react to diverse situations; I understand their character and know their values.”

True friendship is a spiritual journey, which “both requires and produces growth in goodness, not as friendship’s goal, but in order to equip us for befriending,” Simon concludes. “Being a friend requires strength of character. As we strive to do what friendship calls for, we will grow. Sharing our friend’s sorrows will exercise our compassion; sharing our friend’s hardships and dangers will exercise our endurance and courage.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss the salient features of the intimate knowledge that true friends share, according to Caroline Simon. Have you enjoyed friendships characterized by such knowledge?
2. Tony Hendra recounts his long friendship with Dom Joseph Warrilow in *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*. According to Simon, how does their friendship exemplify each element of intimate knowledge she discusses?
3. In the meditation Bonhoeffer contrasts human and spiritual love. Apply this to the intimate knowledge that friends share.
4. “To know as we are known” alludes to the love-filled knowledge Paul commends in 1 Corinthians 13:12. How can friendship prepare us to see one another and God “face to face”?

Departing Hymn: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (verses 1, 2, and 3)

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness; take it to the Lord in prayer!

Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge—take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he’ll take and shield you, you will find a solace there.

Joseph M. Scriven, 1855

Tune: ERIE

† Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), 36.

Friendship's Role in Coming to Know as We Are Known

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To characterize the intimate knowledge that true friends share—i.e., of the individuals that they are meant to become before God.
2. To consider how this intimate knowledge that friends share can help them to mature as faithful disciples.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Friendship (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" locate the familiar tune ERIE in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Caroline Simon believes friendship requires a kind of intimate knowledge: friends recognize one another's ideal selves—or, as Christians would say, the selves they are meant to be before God. She illustrates this with the story of friendship between comedian Tony Hendra and Dom Joseph Warrilow, which Hendra recounts in *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*.

Though Hendra's "life zigzags from a felt-call to monasticism, to loss of faith, through drug and alcohol dependence and failed relationships, and back to faith," writes Caroline Simon, "through all this, the still center of his turning and tilting world is Father Joe.... Part of the redemptive efficacy of the friendship is Father Joe's ability to see past Tony's fleeting enthusiasms, excesses, doubts, cynicism, and foibles to the warmhearted idealist who wants ultimately to make a difference for good in the world. The endorsement of a friend's self-conception need not be a wholesale endorsement. Friends can help each other see themselves more clearly" (*Friendship*, 69 and 71).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for giving us true spiritual friends who know us intimately and help us to mature as faithful disciples.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Samuel 18:1-5 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion continues a conversation that we began in the previous study guide, "A School of Christian Love," about the role of true friendship in Christian discipleship. The focus here is on the love and intimate knowledge that friends share. Precisely because they love and attend to one another, they come to know the

other in ways that allow them to be open and honest, to correct one other in love, and to guide each other toward their “true selves,” the selves they are destined but not fated to become as they discover and live out God’s intentions for their lives.

Study Questions

1. The central feature that Simon discusses is what she calls the friends’ “depth perception” of one another. “A true friend knows me well enough to see me as I am, warts and all, but also knows me well enough to see me as someone whose best self aspires to be much more,” she writes. “Friendship affirms that a friend’s view of his unfolding life story is substantially correct. Friendship commits itself to helping a person attain his vision of himself. Friendship involves not just endorsing someone’s self-concept, but caring deeply enough about her aspirations to go out of one’s way to help her achieve them. A friend is someone who is on your side, someone who is willing to see the world from your point of view – but not the point of view of your prodigal self, the point of view of your best and truest self.”

She says the friends’ intimate knowledge is mutual: the self-disclosure, caring, correction, and advice giving tend to be symmetrical and reciprocal. Her discussion of how friends deal with self-deception is insightful. “All of us engage in some degree of self-deception about ourselves. In some cases, one may think a friend has lost sight, for the present, of his better self. Cases in which we think our insight into our friends’ unfolding life stories outstrips their own vision of themselves call for patience, humility, and prayer, lest the equality and mutuality essential to friendship dwindle. Knowing when to speak and how to speak as a friend demands wisdom and skill. How can we correct without unduly wounding or being paternalistic? One wants to give one’s friend the benefit of the kind of insight only a friend can furnish; yet one wants the story that one’s friend lives out to be his own.”

The third salient feature is that friends know one another not only through the thoughts and feelings they disclose, but also through their sensing, or intimating, the other’s way of being and looking at life. Friends “communicate truths which could not and need not be uttered between them.”

2. Briefly review the relationship between Hendra and Father Joe. Simon admits it may be too asymmetrical to be called a friendship. Emphasize how Father Joe sees and encourages the best in Hendra, and how Hendra grows spiritually through the relationship. (Note the subtitle of Hendra’s memoir: *The Man Who Saved My Soul*.) Only as Father Joe is dying does Hendra become more aware of Father Joe’s life and needs and begin to give care to him.
3. Bonhoeffer thinks our knowledge of others is always grounded in how we love them. If we love someone with a purely “human love,” unmediated by Christ’s vision and love for the person, we must construct our own “image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become.” When our love is mediated by Christ’s love, we can see them in a richer way, as “the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.”

This raises a lot of interesting issues. Which passions and desires in us prevent us from loving (and seeing) our friends as God sees them? What tempts us to confuse what we want for a friend with what is best for them given God’s intentions for their lives? How do we develop spiritual love that overcomes such blindness?

4. Despite the way we often misuse Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13 in wedding services, the Apostle is not describing about the beauty and (potential) constancy of romantic love. He is explaining the relationship between true wisdom and love for one another. (The “proud” Corinthian church members, who think they are very wise, cannot be wise because they are woefully short on love.) Only a person whose heart is fully matured in faith, hope, and love – but especially in love – can see themselves or other people as God sees them. Then they will know – themselves, other persons, or God – as they have been known by God.

Only true friendships that call us out of ourselves and give us practice in loving another individual for who that person really is, for the better self that God intends for the person, train us in Christian love that sees ourselves and others “face to face.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.