

## **“The Power and Responsibility of Friendship”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church  
on May 6, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Easter 6)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 98 (VU #818, Refrain #2)  
John 15:9-17

(The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We are in a different world. Work ethics have changed for the better, I would argue, in that we are clear about how people should be treated within a work setting. It no longer is seen as appropriate to intimidate and abuse in order to get performance out of an employee, or make sure a job is done well. If it ever worked (and I think the history of brutal regimes from Roman times and before show they did not work) they certainly do not work now.

But we also have put limits on the other side of the work equation. Some say it is wrong to make friends in the work environment, especially when one has a supervisory responsibility. It may be okay for people sharing an office or working together on the assembly line to make friendships, going out for a coffee or beverage after the shift is done, but not for the supervisors to do the same thing with their employees that they supervise.

In the emerging world of social media, and within the controversies we all hear about Facebook, whether or not we use the platform in our personal lives, there are various expectations as to how to communicate in this day and age.

While acting Executive Secretary of Bay of Quinte Conference, where I was invited to move into a situation very conflicted and in turmoil, I read an article that a person in a supervisory role should not befriend someone who reports to you, or over whom you have supervisory responsibility and potentially called upon to exercise discipline. That role meant I could be making decisions related to the lives of any minister or lay leader in the Conference, and so I made sure I was not friends on Facebook with anyone.

As Dr. Phil might say: “Tell me how that worked for you, Bill – having no friends.”

Well, the truth is I had people with whom I worked in a friendly manner, but for some my rebuff at being their “friend” on Facebook reflected a snobbish and stand-offish attitude. Even a conscious attempt to explain my policy did not engage many people.

The world today is different because we have so many ways to be connected to people outside of regular human contact that we are not sure what to do and how to act. And so we interpret Jesus' teachings on friendship and loving one another in the context of our own challenges and realities.

But Jesus was very clear about the role of friendship in life, and his attitude can be summed up by one basic statement: “Do you have at least someone who has your back?”

In a recent workshop, former Moderator Peter Short offered that one of the essential questions that people need to be able to answer when they seek to live a life as a Christian – and especially as he was addressing people who seek to offer leadership in the church – both lay people and ministers, is the following:

“Do you have someone who will protect your back –  
support you no matter what?”

Someone once said that “A true friend is someone who is there with you no matter what you are going through even when he or she would rather be anywhere else.”

Thomas More, the medieval scholar, said that “Dialogue exists when two friends of eternal truth swear to each other that they will yield only to the light.”

Jesus was clear that friendship involved something from us. There is no demand or expectation of another that diminishes that person or fails to recognize the other’s value as a human being.

He uses language that we may see as very dated – the language of the master – slave as the opposite of what he is speaking about, yet the term “Master-Slave” is used even today for communication equipment where one piece of equipment controls the process, and other pieces are subservient to the main piece.

For Jesus, and the early church, simply put, the love of Christ went beyond simple friendship – in Greek “philia” was friendship, but in the New Testament love was known as “agape,” defined as the kind of love that exists when you do good will to another person even when you do not feel like it.

You see, loving your enemies is about that – doing good will even when you do not have a real point of contact or desire to do what is uplifting and encouraging.

We have defined neighbourliness too much in our time as a goal to create an advantage for ourselves.

The City of Kelowna has a Being Neighbourly brochure that is to encourage a new attitude in their community.

It says that if you know your neighbours, you will be healthier and happier; your physical and mental wellness will be bolstered; your personal safety and neighbourhood security will be enhanced, you may save money and time with the help neighbours can give, and you will have opportunities to be more social, and so have fun.

One of the set questions with many service-oriented positions today is to give an example of where you went beyond the usual service expectations to help a customer.

One person when asked that question for a shoe sales position said, “I once patiently waited as a customer tried on 10 pairs of shoes, and remained calm even though she did not buy any of them.” The person hiring said that is not extraordinary – shoe sales people are supposed to bring out shoes for someone to try on.

An example of going the extra mile was someone looking for a style of shoe that had been discontinued, but his mother found them very comfortable and wanted another pair as her pair was worn out. She was dying of cancer and wanted comfort for her feet. The sales associate contacted the head office, spoke to the person who controlled old stock and out of production merchandise, and found the desired pair of shoes for the customer.

Another example was a person who worked at a Wendy's, and there was a torrential rain storm like at the Kentucky Derby yesterday. A person with a walker was struggling to get out of the restaurant and across the parking lot in the rain, so the employee grabbed a huge patio umbrella, opened it up, and walked the man across the parking lot. Some might say, "That is not his job, what is he doing?" but the recruiter saw that story as an example where service was the key to the employee's attitude. He treated the customer not as a slave but as a neighbour.

What would be your story of going the extra mile for someone? Does something come to mind for you? To seed the conversation, mine was helping a woman who was limited to a wheelchair in her small apartment and her television had stopped working. I visited her regularly, but on this day I loaded the TV into my van and drove it to the repair shop some 35 miles away, and retrieved it when it was repaired. Now the chair of the Ministry and Personnel Committee of that church was very upset by my actions, and was clear I was not being paid to get televisions repaired. But when I explained that while I enjoyed visiting his mother, what she needed that day was to get her television repaired so she would have the news and some entertainment in her apartment when he and his wife were in Florida for the winter, he reluctantly agreed I did the right thing.

You can't live the way of Jesus, and do all that is expected in his teaching, if you have to do it on your own. You need help. In communion we have a visible reminder of the need for help – a reminder of the spirit being with us in life. And in communion we are reminded what we hold in common with others – the crowd of witnesses that support and guide us.

Standing with another is a powerful witness, and a great responsibility.

We are up to it, with God's help, for we are not alone.