

## **Friendship: For Better, For Worse**

The Beatles sang it in 1967: *I get by with a little help from my friends*. That's not exactly a church hymn, but the feelings it expresses are nonetheless central to the faith. We need one another. We need friends. For many of us, belonging to a church is deeply interwoven with our sense of belonging to a network of people who care for us and about whom we care. We get by with the Great Commandment.

But in a society as mobile as ours, it's difficult to build and to keep a strong network of good friends even within a congregation. Jobs end, or jobs are transferred to other cities, and so people leave. Jobs change, because companies have merged or downsized, and yet more people leave. Strangers show up, more of them every month. Rapid turnover in the workplace leads to what sociologists call "churning" in communities. Despite email, despite cheap long-distance phone rates, it gets harder and harder every year to find and to keep the close friends upon whom we most depend.

## **Fidelity and Friendship**

All of this got me thinking about what congregations or women's groups in congregations might do to foster friendships and to sustain them. I think that effort might start with remembering that *fidelity* is central to the faith. Sexual fidelity within marriage has always had a lot of attention, because everyone worries about unplanned pregnancies and sexually-transmitted diseases. But even in marriage, fidelity is more than exclusive rights to certain of one another's body parts. *Faithful* relationships, whether between spouses or between ordinarily friends, are at heart the effort to offer one another the steadfast loving-kindness and abiding presence that God offers each of us.

And yet, loving our neighbors as ourselves is difficult when we don't know who the neighbors are--or even who the newcomers are, standing there in the next pew over. Loving our neighbors as ourselves is at odds with the anonymity of city life, an anonymity that too easily carries over into congregational life. We need to teach the practices upon which this deeper fidelity depends, and we need to learn them, and above all we have to find the bold courage required to turn strangers into friends. Only then can we hope to turn collections of strangers and mere acquaintances into real Christian community.

## **The Power of Storytelling**

So how do we do this? First, I propose, we share our stories. Women have always swapped stories, of course, but in the last few decades theorists across a wide range of disciplines have come to agree that storytelling is at the heart of what it means to be human. When we make sense of something, when we find meaning, what we are doing is assembling a story. Stories are the form or the structure by which we organize and share what we know, what we understand, what we have painfully gained of valuable wisdom.

I remember well the schoolteachers who sharply reprimanded any student who offered a definition beginning "when." "Generosity is when . . ." or "poverty is when . . ." would never do.

But what we were doing, of course, was starting to tell a miniature story: Generosity is when somebody shares with somebody else. Poverty is when someone doesn't have enough to live on. But in fact all of knowledge, even scientific theory, is ultimately organized that way. Look behind the dictionary definition, look to the origins, and there's always a tale to be told. Narratives come first. Stories come before lexicographers.

Storytelling is also, then, a key way to turn strangers into friends and friends into communities. It's not merely socializing; it's part of the larger practice of fidelity. In *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commission*, Teresa Godwin Phelps contends that hearing and honoring one another's stories can be a sacramental act. It can be holy-making; it can make manifest the presence of God.

It's also demonstrably good for anyone's physical health. In *Emotional Longevity*, Norman Anderson-the former head of the American Psychological Association-describes study after study demonstrating that people who have friends live longer, healthier lives. Furthermore, people who can tell their stories, even if only through writing that nobody ever reads, also experience significant gains in health and well-being. The data he offers are quite astounding.

### **Storytelling Resources for Ministry**

Furthermore, there are wonderful books available that resourceful women might put to good use in helping one another share stories. In *The Healing Companion: Simple and Effective Ways Your Presence Can Help People Heal*, Jeff Kane MD offers advice based on his years of experience leading support groups for cancer patients. He explains how to help people who are seriously ill or otherwise deeply suffering to tell the stories they need to tell in order to come to terms with their own situations. Each chapter offers a few very ordinary, very compassionate questions that any sensible person could use at a hospital bedside without feeling fake, and without feeling that they're pretending to be some sort of therapist rather than an honest, grieving friend. *Writing as a Way of Healing*, by Louise de Salvo, offer a wide variety of well-honed exercises and thoughtful explanations originally intended for people who keep journals. But her lively, specific questions will work at least as well for small group sharing.

I'd also suggest taking a look at *The Stories We Live By*, by Dan McAdams, who's a professor of psychology. He explores and explains the stages whereby we construct a sense of identity by means the stories we tell ourselves about our own lives. In chapter ten, he lists and explains the questions he used when interviewing people for this book. These questions could keep a monthly women's group going for a year or more. Or they could provide an easy foundation for a "getting to know one another" women's retreat. If I were leading such a retreat, I'd add a few questions about what role God played in any of the stories people are asked to share, or about when or how people first became aware of God's presence. Help devising those questions can be had from books on faith development, such as James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*.

### **Seeing as God Sees**

But it's not enough to tell our stories. Storytelling as a practice of fidelity equally requires listeners who know how to listen in faith: fidelity is a quality of relationship, after all, not

something we do on our own. But faithful listening demands the ability to see one another as God sees us-as graced and growing, not as helpless and hopeless. We need to respond to each other in ways that affirm one another's competence, insight, and courage. But that means we have to silence our own egos and our own need for control. That's hard. And the harder I struggle to do so, the more I find myself silently praying for grace.

I've also come to rely on a few good sources, principally three books by psychotherapist Harriet Lerner: *The Dance of Anger* (1985), *The Dance of Intimacy* (1989), *The Dance of Connection* (2001). In very practical and thought-provoking ways, she analyzes the ordinary difficulties besetting human relationships, explaining what to say, what not to say, and why. Here, then, are some good responses, loosely gleaned from Harriet Lerner, that you might want to consider. I've found that they can work remarkably well in helping me to convey my confidence-my loving-kindness, if you will-that whoever I'm listening to is a capable person.

*What are you thinking about doing?* is a much better reaction than "Here's what you should do" or even "Here's what I did when that happened to me." Most people with a problem already have some sense of how to solve it, after all. Maybe what they need most is your moral support as they put that plan into action. Maybe you will see that they need to borrow your car or to have you take care of their kids for a while. Jumping in with a solution of your own can inadvertently suggest that you think the other person is incompetent, and it can short-circuit their own thinking about what to do.

*What do you think are the reasons behind this situation?* signals your interest in their situation and affirms your sense that they have the brains necessary to figure it out. It's very tempting to say "Here's what's really going on." Maybe we do see what's going on accurately, but the faithful response, and the friendship-building response, is to be a live audience for her efforts to formulate this understanding for herself. She is the one who has to cope with the situation, after all.

*How do you feel about all this?* similarly signals a faithful willingness to hear about her pain, her frustration, her fear, her anger. That can be redemptive. What's not redemptive is what I've come to think about as the "two problems problem." If I share a problem with some people, they get so distraught that then I have two problems-as if now I'm supposed to comfort and console *them*. Getting distraught can be a way of shutting down people who turn to you for support.

*How do you want to handle this?* wins out every time over *You did WHAT?* When I've done something dumb, and as a result something has exploded in my face, I usually recognize this state of affairs even before I turn to someone for help. I appreciate it deeply when they restrain themselves from pointing out that I'm a blazing idiot: chances are I'm all too aware of that fact already! Garrison Keillor's stories often depict characters offering one another such graceful self-control. Often it moves the grateful recipient to a fervent resolve to "sin no more."

Harriet Lerner never suggests asking, *Where is God in this for you?* but I think that's a key question. I have a wise friend who often responds to my tales of woe with a simple *Do you think you can pray about this?* Once she listened to me rant and rave for half an hour about someone, then said, *Do you think you can pray for her?* I was floored. But it was a good question and a

faithful question, and when I finally managed to pray for this person many things became much clearer to me.

Fidelity in relationships requires the effort to love as God loves, with that same abiding strength and certainty and willingness to see one another's strengths not our stupidities. Such relationships depend upon practices such as telling stories and listening to them sacramentally. Doing so helps us signal our fidelity to one another: faithful friendships are not based cost-benefit ratios. We marry for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health-and although friendships don't have the same erotic expression that marriages do, our deepest friendships share in this same abiding commitment.

In that regard, fidelity is simply the concrete form of the Great Commandment: all of us get by with the help of our friends, because all of us need somebody to love.

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