

The View from Blackwater Bluff — Charles LaFond

What does it mean to be stewards of friendship? If all that God gives to us is gift and if stewardship is “the right use and care for the gifts God gives to us,” then does friendship not take its place among the things for which we are grateful to God? We need to be as intentional about caring for friendship as we are about caring for money or time or the planet.

Living on a farm along a silent dirt road in rural New Hampshire is a delicious way to live — most days. But I still miss the monks among whom I lived in the monastery (well...some of them) and I miss the ease with which friendship came by sheer proximity and mutual love of God. As spring wakens into summer and we all crawl out of our winterized homes, it occurs to me how splendid friendship is and how much it is to be cherished and sought.

John’s gospel speaks of Jesus’ friendship with “the beloved disciple.” Scholars are unsure who that beloved disciple was. Was it John, the brother of James and son of Zebedee? Or was “the one whom Jesus loved” some other friend? We will never know. Some say it was left ambiguous to hide the fact that it was a woman or to open up the possibility to the reader — you and me — of seeing ourselves as Jesus’ beloved friend. Regardless, Jesus had friends and even *beloved* friends such as Lazarus for whom he cried or Peter whom he begged over and over again to tell him he loved him, or Mary to whom he revealed resurrection.

As the summer unfolds we will have slightly more time on our hands. Our over-caffeinated nation will slow just a bit and here we will enjoy summer in New Hampshire for its cool nights, warm days, and stunning geographical beauty. We will



work our gardens and enjoy our friendships. I wonder if we are aware of how similar those two occupations are.

Blackwater Bluff Farm has four new gardens. There is a squash garden for the fall, an herb garden by the kitchen, a wild flower garden for the bees and a huge vegetable garden. These gardens had to be cut from rocky New Hampshire soil. They had to be sifted of rocks and weeds and grass. They need to be regularly weeded and fed and watered and protected.

Our friendships are not so different. They need the right mix of conditions for growth, careful tending, protection from the occasional storm, and the right and regular feeding of water and nutrients. Though they require hard work, the fruit they produce is life-giving. And, just as we can waste our money and time, so too we can waste friendship if we fail to nourish it.

In his best-selling book *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, John O’Donohue discusses the Christian theology of friendship and makes this breathtaking assertion about friendship:

Human presence is a creative and turbulent sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. Nowhere is there such intimate and frightening access to the mysterious. Friendship is the sweet grace that liberates us to approach, recognize, and inhabit this adventure.

Friendship — like other forms of wealth — is not easy to attain or keep. Some are too selfish for it or too busy for it or too frightened of losing it to risk gaining it in the first place. But for most of us, friendship is a gift from God — whose life in the Trinity is a life of constant love and friendship with the Son and the Holy Spirit. In some ways, God has never existed apart from friendship ...and created us in His image.

Daringly, Aelred of Rievaulx, a 12th century monk and a saint most attuned to friendship, its theology and its stewardship, changed the statement “God is love” to “God is friendship.” No one objected. It rang true.

Summer’s rest is a good time to till the soil of our gardens. Summer is also a good time to till the soil of our friendships. The callouses on our gardening hands and those on our friend-shipped hearts are badges of love for what God gives to us. The love of our closest friends, which we learn here on earth, will be the language with which we sing out into eternity.

Collect for the Feast of Aelred of Rievaulx

Pour into our hearts, O God, the Holy Spirit’s gift of love, that we, clasping each the other’s hand, may share the joy of friendship, human and divine, and with your servant Aelred draw many to your community of love; through Jesus Christ the Righteous, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The Rev. Canon Charles LaFond is diocesan stewardship officer.