

One is Silver and the Other's Gold

Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie

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When I was very depressed several summers ago, I decided to go see a psychic. When you're depressed enough, you'll try anything! I thought she might be able to provide me with some hope and direction for the future - I figured even if she was a crackpot, I could still use the placebo effect.

I went to her house and we sat in her garden. She began by asking me questions "to get a feel for me," she said. She asked, who are the dead people hanging around me, and I said I didn't know. Already I eyed her suspiciously. She asked me why I was carrying so much pain in my body and I explained about the surgery on my left shoulder, and the slipped disk in my lower back. Then she asked me a question that absolutely knocked the breath out of me. She asked, "who sees you?"

Three simple words. It took my breath away because it got right down to the bottom of my loneliness. Who sees me? Meaning, who understands me? Who sees the REAL me? Not the me who tries to look good in front of others, or tries to please whoever I think needs pleasing, but sees me inside and out, all my passions, all my secret fears, all the bare, honest parts of me that show who I really am?

At first, because of the sadness and self-pity I was feeling at the time, I drew a blank. My god, I wondered, does anybody really see me? But then I smiled with relief because I remembered. Of course. I answered the psychic's question, "my friends see me." And then I added, "my friends keep me sane." She laughed and said, "yes, that's what friends are for."

And so I want to begin this morning by posing the same question to you: "WHO SEES YOU?" Who is there in your life that you can let every single guard down for. Who sees the parts of you that so often seem to go unnoticed? And these don't have to be the wounded parts of you - perhaps they're the sides of you that you absolutely love but one would have to know you pretty well to see them. Maybe it's the side of you who is sensitive to beauty, has a sly sense of humor, or cares very, very deeply about something. Who sees and understands where you are vulnerable? Who can see all these things about you?

It is often not our parents or our children who can see these things. It's because we can never have the shared experience of living in the same generation. Have you ever imagined what it would be like to meet one of your parents as a peer, as the same age you are now? I'll never forget my father's reaction to the last scene of the Kevin Costner movie, *Field of Dreams*. In this scene, through a magical baseball field, a father comes back from the dead as the same age of his son, who is living. They are both in early adulthood, and the father is even a little younger than the son. Imagine meeting your parents even younger than yourself!

There had been ill will between the father and son, and it truly was a dream - to get a chance to reconcile this relationship with a simple game of catch. But what was truly dreamlike about this meeting was juxtaposing a father and son as peers. As two peers who could easily be friends. It was like Kevin Costner's character couldn't see the vulnerability in his father and have compassion and forgiveness for him until he saw him as he was as a young man.

I had never seen my father cry and I was in High School. He cried the whole way home in the car and my mother had to drive. I know that my father didn't feel like he ever had much of a father-son relationship with his dad, let alone a friendship with him. My grandfather was still alive at the time, too, but it was obvious my father was mourning for what was irretrievably lost: to do the things that so many boys do with their fathers as they grow up. Just playing catch.

It's important to make distinctions about age differences when we talk about friendship. Many of us long to be friends with our parents and our children, and we are lucky when there is that semblance of friendship. But even when that is true, they are not the same as the friendships we have with our peers. It has something to do with what Jesus once said: "A prophet is not rejected except in his own town and in his own family and in his own house."

What does that mean exactly? No, we are not prophets, but each one of us has a 'prophet-part.' There are parts of us that our families of origin will never "get," because there are parts of us that have to grow away from them. Try as they might, our parents will never see exactly who we are. The gulf of difference between children and parents is actually supposed to be a kind of soaring grace, and Kahlil Gibran picked the perfect metaphor to describe it in his poem *The Prophet*, when he compares parents to the bow and children to the arrows. He says to the parents, "The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and bends you with might that the arrows may go swift and far. Let you bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness."

What an image! That the effort of parenthood produces a soaring arrow! Because of this distance, our children will never see us completely, either; it works both ways. As human beings, each one of us could not possess such a unique spark if we were so easily understood by our families.

To me, this is the absolute spice of life, this is humanity's most enchanting quality - that we are each so different. What this means is that one of life's greatest challenges is to understand others and to be understood. I don't think we can overestimate the importance of being understood.

In a sermon about friendship, it's important to talk about loneliness. It is strange how, as the population grows larger, more people live alone and feel isolated. And when family life fails us, we can feel isolated in a home full of people. I am convinced that the number one ill effect of modernity is isolation. So much of modernity contains this dehumanizing side effect, and it is compounded by one of the most foundational American values: self-reliance. Emerson meant well, but it is an inflated emphasis on self-reliance that can serve to keep us isolated from one another. There are times when we can't and shouldn't rely on ourselves alone. When you're feeling bad, how good are you at asking others for support? Do you hesitate and try to figure it out by yourself, first?

They say that's what friends are for, and that is absolutely true. We cannot be understood unless we allow ourselves to succumb to times of weakness in our lives. Times when we need to confide in another and say, "I don't know." Whether it's with partners or friends, we need this intimacy in our lives to come to our full humanity, to understand and to be understood. A mentor of mine named Paula had a certain way of describing intimacy: intimacy, means 'in-to-me-see.' It's only when you allow others to 'in-to-me-see' that this very human emotional need can be met.

There are many different kinds of friendships with different levels of intimacy - but what's more interesting from a spiritual point of view is how friendship functions as nourishment for the soul.

Friendship often seems to be overlooked as an essential part of our spiritual lives. Where in the Bible does it talk about friendship? There are not too many places. Did Jesus have friends? Followers are not friends. Did Jesus ever talk about the human need for friendships? Not according to the authors of the gospels. One thing that is often overlooked when people talk about Jesus is the fact that Jesus himself needed salvation, that he himself was in search of it, and that much of his teachings come out of a deep drive to be loved himself, to be understood, as the mere human being that he was.

In liberal religion, we tend to speak of salvation as worldly, and one place we find this salvation is in our friendships - to be profoundly understood is a kind of salvation. Salvation in friendship can come about in two important ways:

The first is what I have been speaking of - to be seen, to be known, to be understood in all our complexity and vulnerability and beauty. The second has very much to do with the conventional theology of salvation: to be forgiven. To be forgiven, despite our faults and our mistakes. I don't think most of us buy into the traditional theology of absolution - that Jesus died for our sins. I don't think most of us are consciously concerned with whether or not God forgives us. But we do care that our loved ones forgive us, we do care that our friends forgive us for our mistakes, we do care that our friends accept us as we are.

I know who my best friends are - they're the ones that no matter how badly I mess up they're not going anywhere. There's nothing I could do that would make them stop loving me. It is a lot like 'God's love' that traditional Christianity speaks of. It's unconditional. Personally, I can find salvation in God's love. However, I often prefer the love of my friends over the love of a God who can seem abstract and distant. What I really need is the down-to-earth, laughing, crying, hugging love of a friend more. It means more to me to talk with my close friends than to talk with God.

That has a classic heretical ring to it, doesn't it? But it's because life is for the living! For now! On this earth, in this present moment! It's the people we can touch with our hands, hear with our ears, and see with our eyes that matter the most. It is in and among the living where I seek unconditional love. It is within human relationship where true salvation comes to pass in this life.

Some of our best friendships come from unlikely places, and do manage to cross generations. There is a story in the Hebrew Bible that offers a good example, in the Book of Ruth. Ruth, who is of a different ethnic background than her mother-in-law Naomi, and has no incentive to follow her back to Judah, where people of Ruth's kind are hated, says this: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." It's amazing what good can come when we don't burn bridges! There is a definition of evil that says evil is the rupturing of relationship. So the opposite must be to salvage relationship. Perhaps the opposite of evil is not "good" - which is such a subjective term, but simply 'relationship.'

I have a friendship story of my own to share. It's my favorite one. When I was a freshman in High School, I met Erin, who had just moved to Illinois from Texas. Erin was different - she dressed different, she was a bit rebellious, and I thought she was very cool. We had lots of fun together. But Sophomore year brought personal crisis into Erin's life and one of the results was dropping me as a friend. I was devastated! It was my first broken heart. I was sad for months about it, but slowly it turned into an uneasy hatred, and even though we had classes and worked as waitresses at the same retirement village together, we did not speak to each other.

The last thing we did together as friends was go to the local aquarium to buy fish for our fresh water fish tanks at home. That day I bought a beautiful creme colored Angel fish, that when the sun light shone on its scales, they turned iridescent colors. I LOVED that fish - I named her Goldie. I let this fish have the whole fish tank to herself, because that's what Angel fish prefer, anyway. Whenever I entered my bedroom the fish would greet me by coming up to the corner of the fish tank. That fish stayed alive almost throughout the rest of High School, well into the Spring of my Senior year. One day I noticed the fish tank's heater had become unplugged, but for some reason, I didn't plug it back in. I was too distracted by senior year.

A day or two later the fish died. And I held myself responsible for not plugging the heater back in. How could I? I felt terrible. I remembered I had bought that fish with Erin and I thought the only way I could feel better was if I called her up, even though our estrangement had gone on for two whole years. I guess I figured I had nothing to lose.

We talked for two hours. And toward the end of the conversation, Erin told me that she's a lesbian. It was the first time anyone had ever come out to me. It made sense, then - she had figured it out around our Sophomore year and didn't know how to handle feelings she was having in her close friendships.

We graduated a few weeks later after that telephone conversation, and it didn't happen right away, but soon we became very close friends again.

Erin and I often wonder if we would still have become friends again if I hadn't called the night my fish died. How else could she have safely come out to me, how else could we have begun to build our trust in each other anew? I realize now that in the same way I gave the fish space to herself, that was what Erin had needed too - she had needed space for herself. And even though I loved that fish, I am so glad that it died!

There's a song I learned in Girl Scouts that is sung in a round: Make new friends, but keep the old, one is silver and the other's gold.

We are never too old to make new friends. And no matter how many years have passed - I assure you this never matters - we can track someone down and rebuild. Or we can rebuild the broken friendships that are nearer to us. It's never too late to make the 'dead fish call.' When we give a friend who has hurt us another chance, we are doing sacred work because we are giving permission for relationship to bloom once more.

This was to be a sermon about love, for the theological worship theme of the month. There are so many types of love, but the most global and universal kind of love is the quality of love we find in healthy and positive human relationships, in community, in friendship. This love, this sacred love, is what the Kingdom of God is made of, that Jesus speaks of again and again in the New Testament. This love is among us and in us; it is the salvation we find in human relationship.

To heal and nurture our friendships is holy work.

And to make an unlikely friendship possible is radical holy work - when we create the conditions for such an unlikely friendship to sprout in.

We are surrounded by seeds of potential friendships!

I need to keep my friendships in full bloom around me, so that they're close enough to 'in-to-me-see.' Because I need that 'in-to-me-see.' I'm betting that you do, too.