

**“The Epiphany Of Friendship:
Gail Greenwell’s Institution Sermon”**

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[Given on the Institution of The Rev. Gail Greenwell]

In the Name of God who gives us to each other and calls us “friends.”
Amen.

One of my favorite theologians, Woody Allen, tells a joke at the end of his film Annie Hall about the guy who goes to his psychiatrist and says, “Doc, I’m concerned about my brother. He’s really crazy; he thinks he’s a chicken.” The doctor says, “Why don’t you turn him in so he can get some help?” The guy responds, “I would but I need the eggs.” Then he concludes this classic reflection on the complications of relationship by reflecting, “That’s how I feel anymore about relationships. They’re so crazy but what can we do? Most of us just need the eggs.”

Relationships are complex. The kind that Woody Allen is thinking about, the kind we see Jesus and his disciples in the midst of, or those that make up congregational life, or even just the logical either/or of our normal process of discernment and decision making. We are always choosing between one thing and another. Today we in the church are asked to choose for instance between:

- Those who view the church's purity as necessary to its mission and hence to the world's salvation; and those who find the weakness and even the faithlessness of the church to be inspiring reminders that only God can save both the church and the world. Or,
- Those who condemn the church and its leaders for failing in the prophetic proclamation of justice and those who find the true role of prophesy as to notice how God is always already out ahead of us bringing about His reign in the world while we argue about places of honor. Or,
- Those who understand ministry as obedience to a commanding Christ and those who see it as a shared partnership with Christ. Or,
- Those who fixate on the "fall" from paradise and see God's work as "restoration" and those who understand creation as "experimental," provisional, and always being perfected. And

- Those whose vision of the current crisis is apocalyptic, that is who see it as dragging us down to the point at which God must intervene to save us, and those whose vision is eschatological, that is who see the church and the world as having been entrusted to us, that we are, so to speak, growing up into Christ who calls us friends because we know what he is doing.

Whatever side of the continuum you come down on, whatever choice you make, and however polarized the church may appear, we are inextricably bound up with each other.

In spite of our habitual tendency to label, oversimplify and sometimes unjustly judge each other's motives and intentions, we are nevertheless in this together. You can't be an optimist without a pessimist after all. An optimist believes that this is the best of all possible worlds—and the pessimist is afraid he's right. Whether enemies or friends the two are twinned.

Partnership is prior to mission. And relationship is prior to partnership. Because the God who invites us into partnership is Himself a relationship. And in Jesus God has entered into partnership with the very world he came to save. The nature of relationship means that we may hear God in our own voice speaking to another. And it means that we can hear God in the voice of the other, whether friend or enemy, speaking to us.

One of the wonderful things about parish ministry is the mutual experience of relationships, of friendship. It's wonderful even though on occasion clergy can become the object of a parishioner's enmity. It's a remarkable experience because in my experience it has occurred where our relationship has been unusually close, where before the break I had been admired and seen as something of a model for this other's spiritual life.

René Girard, a compelling theorist of violence and religion, defines enmity from his study of literature as a function of intimate affection: "The subject is torn between too opposite feelings toward his model--the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice. This is the passion we call hatred." He goes on to say, "Only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred."

Misunderstanding Jesus' ministry, his followers first worshipped him and soon after envied and resented him. They saw him as the greatest and then argued over which one was to become the next greatest. And when his understanding of the purpose of God disappointed their own ambitions, when he insisted on a kind of messianic rule that led by way of servanthood, by the leader becoming the

slave of all and the victim of all, they betrayed him to his enemies and joined in crucifying him.

Girard goes on, "The person who hates first hates himself for the secret admiration concealed by his hatred. In an effort to hide this desperate admiration from others and from himself, he no longer wants to see in his mediator anything but an obstacle." I've found it's always a good idea, in those with whom we find ourselves at odds, to look in them for the things we most long to have admired in ourselves. Your new rector knows the loneliness that comes from admiration and adulation; like any parish priest she has tasted the rejection of those who moments before looked to her for inspiration.

Here in John's Gospel's version of the Last Supper, Jesus knowingly steps into these dangerous dynamics of relationship. By the intimacy of his words and gestures that night he both ennobles his disciples, and at the same time deflates their hero worship. He frustrates their idolatry of him by taking off his outer garment and kneeling before them to serve them and by calling them his "friends." He shows that God is not so in control that he will not risk sharing with us, like a true friend and partner, the initiative and responsibility for his creation.

This insight—that God invites us into a friendship, a partnership—John could only have had after the resurrection. The same Jesus the disciples had betrayed and abandoned, in the resurrection appears to them as forgiveness. Only then can they dare to see that their hatred, their disdain for the crucified Jesus, perhaps even covered up by their pity or by self-righteous indignation, was really the bitter fruit of disillusionment and disappointment. And only then could it begin to dawn on them that here was a leader different than they could have known and a messiah different than they had until then been able to imagine. Because here was a God who is different than they could ever before fathom.

It is this moment of illumination that the resurrection allows—this "Epiphany of Friendship" with God—that makes it possible for those who in their disappointment had united against Jesus to see their own wrath as something other than God's judgment. And because in this moment they are able to receive forgiveness, their relationships are transfigured and the Mission of the Church is born. This means that it is in those relationships transfigured by the resurrection, and in the radical acceptance and forgiveness of God that flows from them, that the new creation that Jesus comes to bring is to be found. Relationship is truly prior to mission.

Listen to how Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recently addressed this reality: "Jesus creates relationships . . . the Word made flesh does what God habitually does, creates relationships, shapes them by his will and his

love and his presence . . . And so, from the start, where Jesus is, there is the church . . . It is not an institution designed to further a programme . . . but the beginning of . . . God's reclaiming of creation as his own and God's pouring into creation of his saving and transfiguring power so that the world, human and non human, will once again show radiantly who and what he is as God.

“So I think if I were to try and identify the first principle of a real mission theology, it might be somewhere in that area – the event of the new creation. The church is the name we give to those networks, those places, those relationships which embody the event of the new creation.”

This new creation event depends upon a transfigured relationship with God and transfigured relationships with others. And all of these relationships are engaged in the dawning of God's new creation by their risky willingness to give and receive the forgiveness, love, and the dignity that flows from the resurrection.

At a time like this we might be expected to focus on the role of the rector and the importance of “charismatic” leadership. In fact, I think it's required! And don't get me wrong. There is a lot to focus on regarding the gifts and talents of your new Rector. And that's not to mention her husband and their wonderful daughters.

But what we are called to celebrate tonight is not the capacity for congregational leadership of your new rector, but an entirely new set of transfigured relationships. Michael Ramsey, an earlier Archbishop of Canterbury, put it this way: "If you want to know what clergy are for, do not start with pragmatic considerations, the jobs you would like clergy to do in running things or providing 'leadership,' start with the picture of an assembly that in its formal structure and its disposition of responsibilities and its language, gesture and process draws you towards a contemplative understanding of the act of God in cross and resurrection and in the eternal love by which God is God."

Ramsey's liturgical vision is of an assembly of contemplative engagement in the act of God that is the very act of reclamation that Williams speaks of. It is your relationship with Gail, your friendship with God in the risen Christ, played out in the “responsibilities, language, gesture and process” of congregational life together, that faithfully responds to the call to mission in the Kingdom of God.

This engagement in the act of God is always challenging and can sometimes seem pretty crazy. We need to return again and again to the fact that we do not serve on our own initiative. We have been chosen, all of us, not because of our value or usefulness to the mission, but out of God's own gracious loving kindness. Any usefulness that we might discover is a function of that

divine choice. Any qualification and gift we might exercise is not finally ours but God's. Ultimately it's not about us.

This is important for us to remember because, as the world normally understands and experiences relationships, they inevitably give rise to envy and rivalry. "The only way to escape," says Girard, "the only radical solution, would be for both friends to renounce all possessive desire once and for all. The real choice is between tragic conflict and total renunciation, the Kingdom of God, the Golden Rule of the Gospels." That radical solution is what we call baptism.

There is a persistent myth that we clergy know what we are doing, that we orchestrate everything behind the scenes or are so closely in touch with the almighty that we have an inside track on how things will turn out. When we are at our best we are hearing God together as a vestry or a congregation. But even at our best the enterprise of proclaiming the kingdom of God always involves working "without a net." Gail will lean-in to listen to God speak through each of you, especially in controversy and strongly held feelings. She will see key ideas and decisions come from others not because we know what we are doing but because together we are in partnership with Christ.

It is the water of baptism that transfigures our relationships, that makes us friends and partners of one another and of Christ without possessive desire and rivalry, without needing to be victorious or to stigmatize those with whom we disagree. For in Christ "we are [all] members one of another," we are partners in the New Creation, and we abide in the love of God.

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