

Upon graduating from St. Andrew's College in 1985 and being ordained that June, Michele and I were settled by the church in Gilbert Plains, Manitoba. We lived in and served that community and congregation for the next four years. It was a half hour's drive to the next largest center which was Dauphin; which, compared to the village of Gilbert Plains, was a thriving metropolis. I mean, they had a mall! The largest, the anchor store of that mall was a Canadian Tire. In those four years, I spent more than a little time in that Canadian Tire. For some reason, beneath my conscious understanding, I'd find myself gravitating again and again to the sporting goods department at Canadian Tire. There I would do things like pound a brand new, sparking white, baseball into the pocket of a new and still stiff baseball glove. I can still remember, sadly and fondly, the good smell of new leather. Sometimes I would pick up a football. (Always the fatter, Canadian ball; never the slim and wimpy NFL version.) I'd toss that ball underhand in a perfect spiral, high above the shelves of merchandise; always keeping an eye out for the store clerk.

Whenever I found myself in the sporting goods aisle of that Canadian Tire, playing catch with myself, I'd always be wondering "What on earth am I doing here?" Then, one day it hit me. I was lonely. I missed having a friend, nearby. Someone with whom to play catch. Someone who'd receive whatever I tossed their way – a ball, a word, a thought, a feeling – and who'd count on me to respond in kind toward them. A friend. // In your life, has there been a time when you've felt this way too? When you've recognized this same need in you? ////

On what must surely have been the loneliest night of Jesus' life, the night on which he was betrayed by a friend, he had said to his disciples: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (*John 15:15*)

Jesus and his disciples in their years together developed an intimate, soul-sharing relationship between them based upon love rather than obligation. Together they'd shared many tears, both of joy and sorrow. They'd had their misunderstandings, as well as moments of incredible connection. In their friendship with Jesus, the disciples had experienced the friendship of God. So on the night he was betrayed, Jesus emphasized the significance of this bond between them; declaring that the greatest expression of both his love and ours is to lay down our life for our friends. After he'd said it, this is precisely what Jesus did. Then three days later, when he'd been raised from the dead, Jesus went looking for his friends once again. And he's still looking for us, isn't he? Still finding us too, I would say; finding us, even, in the sporting goods department of a Canadian Tire store. Indeed, no matter where we are, or, how low and lonely we may get; this One who calls us friend, who is our constant Friend, comes looking for us, finds us, and binds us to himself with chords of love.

Among your own friendships through the years, which of your friends, would you say, has most positively influenced you and your life? Which of your friends has had the greatest impact upon you; upon your faith, perhaps? In what way might you and your friendship have had a great impact upon him or her?

A friend is someone in whom we meet God face-to-face. This is true when we realize it to be so, and when the truth of it lies beneath our consciousness. It's then, we simply have to take it on faith; because, always, such friendship, Christ-like friendship is not a formula but a face. For some other person, it may even be your face. But does this seem too much for you to take on faith? What if you could and did, even for a moment, lay down your life, interrupt your schedule, change your plans and priorities for someone? In doing so, would you not also be reflecting to them the face of their Friend and yours, Jesus?

A man named Jackie White recounts this story from his own life:

[[[Years ago, I worked for a family-owned clothing store in a small Southern town. The atmosphere was always relaxed and congenial. We even had a room upstairs reserved for retired citizens. We called it the Coffee Club. They used the room for drinking coffee, swapping tall tales, and for systematically solving the problems of the world.

One summer a retired government worker from Detroit moved into our community and began to appear at the Coffee Club. Mr. Foster was much more reserved than the others. Finally, he stopped coming. He was missed for a few weeks, then forgotten.

About a year later while selling light bulbs for the Lions Club, I chanced upon Mr. Foster. He was living with his wife in a tiny trailer in an obscure section of town. He invited me in and offered me a Coke. He seemed to be much more animated as he spoke of the days when he was a Lions “Clubber” in Detroit. He bought a package of light bulbs and asked me to come by and see him again. The visit lasted about twenty-five minutes.

I didn’t see Mr. Foster again until several months later. I was driving to play golf and saw him walking by the side of the road. I almost didn’t pull over, because I was in a great hurry to play. However, I decided to anyway. Mr. Foster seemed glad to see me. We talked about the weather and baseball as I drove him to his trailer which was less than ten minutes out of my way. He tried to pay me, but I said, “No, thank you.” He really seemed to appreciate the ride home.

I was visiting my uncle in the hospital the next year, when I recognized Mrs. Foster sitting in the waiting room. She told me that Mr. Foster was having chest pains and that he was in the hospital for tests. I went in to visit him. He didn’t look too well, so I didn’t stay very long; not over five minutes. As I was leaving he said,

“Be careful, son.” I was sort of embarrassed, but he didn’t see me turn red as I hurried out the door.

Later that year I received a call from Mrs. Foster. Mr. Foster had died the night before. She wanted me to be an active pallbearer. Of course, I accepted.

I walked into the chapel and toward the small, hurt figure of Mrs. Foster. I told her I was sorry. I’ll never forget what she said: “Jackie, you were one of his closest friends!”

I had spent forty minutes with him in three years.]]]

I wonder. Might it have been that beneath his conscious understanding, through the eyes-of-faith, Mr. Foster had come see in the face of Jackie White, the face of Jesus? Might it also have been that upon hearing Mrs. Foster’s words – “Jackie, you were one of his closest friends!” – Jackie too had realized that for those three years of their acquaintance, in the face of Mr. Foster, it was the face of Jesus he had seen? What do you think? More to the point, whom do you see?

As Barbara Brown Taylor has written: “To be Christ’s friend is to sit with him on the last day of his life – or on any day of your own – and to listen to him, sharing his hopes and fears, claiming his vision as your own, and accepting his invitation of friendship.”

Recently I read the story of a little girl who had suffered the loss of a girlfriend. Upon arriving home, the little girl’s mother asked where she had been. The little girl said she had been at the home of her friend’s mother, comforting her. Her mother asked, “How could you comfort her? What did you say?” The child replied, “I didn’t say anything. I just sat in her lap and cried with her.” //

As someone who through personal experience also came to learn this child’s profound wisdom once said: “A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.”

Recalling Jesus' words to his friends, Barbara Brown Taylor has written: "Being a friend is much harder than being a servant. You are self-employed, for one thing; there is no one to tell you what to do or how to do it. You are left to your own devices, and there is no pay for overtime – which is just as well, since the hours are highly irregular. Being a friend means taking time out on the busiest day of your life to hold someone's hand while he waits in the doctor's office and talking to him on the telephone in the middle of the night when he wakes up afraid. It means agonizing with someone over her decision to leave her job and celebrating with her when she finds a new one. Being a friend means saying, "I will go with you" over and over again, whether you feel like it or not. It means caring about people so much that you get your hopes and fears all mixed up with their own, and that you want the best for them as much as you want it for yourself.

That is how it was and how it is with our Friend, Jesus. Right? And, so...

"That is who Jesus wants around him, and who he wants to carry on his name – not slaves, who follow his orders without a clue as to what he means; nor servants, who do their jobs and then go home not taking their work with them; but compassionate friends, who accept his ministry as their own and take responsibility for it, risks and all."

Is this who we are, you and me? Is this who we long to be?

May it be so, dear friends.

Dear friends of Jesus.

Amen.