

"Best Friends Forever (BFF)"
John 15:9-17 (NRSV)
The Rev. Dr. Ken Gottman
August 18, 2019

August 2nd was the 77th birthday of John Wayne Huckabee. We've been friends since we were 11. He is exactly 3 weeks older than I. A civil engineer by training, Wayne is living in retirement in Chatham, Illinois—a suburb of Springfield—near his daughter, Hope, her husband Andy, and their two sons, Sam & Evan. In retirement, Wayne has become a finish carpenter & cabinet maker and an expert photographer of Illinois flora & fauna. He's also a docent at Lincoln's Tomb. We call each other every year on our birthdays to catch up, and he reminds me each and every year that no matter how old I become, he'll always be my elder brother.

While he was still in grade school, Wayne's family moved from Ft. Madison, Iowa to Palmyra, Missouri, where his father opened a Gambles Hardware Store. When he was about 7, Wayne was stricken with polio. Although he

was a brilliant student, he missed so much school, he had to be held back a year. We met at Methodist Camp Jo-Ota, near Clarence, Missouri in the summer of 1954, just before we turned 12. We've been friends ever since. Since Palmyra was only 12 miles north of my hometown of Hannibal, and since my parents were from Palmyra and returned twice a month to square dance, Wayne and I had ample opportunities to maintain our friendship.

A few years ago, I received in the mail an invitation to my 55th high school reunion. Mentioned in the invitation was the passing of 8 of our classmates in a 7-month period. Two more have died since November. They are dropping like flies! It reminds me of the brevity and fragility of life, which makes friendship all the more precious.

*Around the corner I have a friend
In this great city that has no end
But the days pass by and the weeks rush on,
And before I know it a year has gone,
And I have not seen my old friend's face,
For life is a hard and a terrible race.*

*And I say tomorrow I'll go see Jim
And let him know I'm thinking of him.
But tomorrow comes and tomorrow goes
And the distance between us grows and grows.
Just around the corner, but miles away.
"Telegram, sir, Jim died today."
Well, that's what I get and deserve in the end...
Around the corner, a vanished friend.*

I am reminded that, after having attended a reunion 15 years ago, I was moved to try to find Steve, my best friend in high school, who was not at the reunion and whom I'd not seen for 30 years. I found him living in a bucolic (remotely rural) setting south of Terre Haute, Indiana. We were able to reconnect and to correspond regularly and visit back and forth when we could.

When we renewed our friendship, it was as if not a moment had passed since last we saw one another. If you have had such a friend, you know what I'm talking about. We lost Steve to death last August 30th. I miss him still and always will.

Remember the friendship of King Saul's son, Jonathan, and David? I Samuel 18:1 puts it this way: *"...and the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."* And after Jonathan is slain in battle, remember David's lament, as recorded in II Samuel 1:25-26. *"How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle! Jonathan lies slain upon the high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women."*

Friendship is a beautiful, even sacred, thing—and not just with humans. Has it occurred to you that we have an opportunity to befriend the earth our home—to protect, preserve, and tend the environment—for unless it is saved, we shall not be saved.

St. Francis has taught us that friendship with the so-called "lower animal world" is also sacred; it is pleasing to God, for God loves everything he has created! Do you have a special four-footed, finned, or feathered friend?

Our beloved Black Lab, Jack, came to us on a mild January day in 2008. For a couple of weeks Donna had been telling me of a stray or abandoned Labrador retriever at Diamond Farms in Villa Ridge, where she boarded her horse. He kept showing up at the barn, then disappearing for a few days. The riders put out bowls of food at the barn door. Later the food would be gone, but nobody could get near him.

One Sunday afternoon I went to the barn, and there was Jack, lying in the afternoon sun. I sat down on a low stone wall about 20 feet away and turned my back to him. In about 10 minutes, I felt Jack's paw on my leg. He was starving and had a deep wound on his left leg. Five days and \$1,500 later, our "free" dog came home from the vet's with us and became our dog forever. We saved him, and he saved us right back!

In 2011 Donna was bedfast for four months, after a freakish and disastrous riding mishap, our beloved black Lab, Jack, never left her side. He's gone now, but in memory very present to

us. When I was at home, Jack followed me wherever I went. As I wrote my sermons, he lay 5 feet away with his muzzle on his front paws. And Miss Thelma the tiger cat, also a rescue, still hops up on my writing desk to sun herself under the desk lamp. She's Donna's cat at night, but mine during the day. Her twin sister, Louise, reverses the process, preferring to camp out at night in the crook in my legs, but hanging with Donna in the morning. We saved both of these litter mate kitties, and they are saving us right back. My children look at me quizzically and ask, "Who ARE you, anyway?" I explain that my circle of friends has expanded since they lived in my house.

Donna is my BFF, my best friend forever. My kids are best friends of mine. Who are yours? What memories of friendship and hopes for friendship are stirring in you today? And what of our friendship with Jesus, through whom we love others, because he first loved us, as the Epistle of I John declares?

What made people **want** to follow Jesus?
What made them **decide** to follow him?

- Was it that he was an amazing storyteller?
- Was it that he was an astounding teacher?
- Was it that Jesus was a consummate debater?
- Was it that he was an apocalyptic figure, ushering in the Kingdom?
- Was it that he was a jaw-dropping miracle worker?
- Was it that Jesus was a great physician?
- Was it that he put the religious hypocrites in their places?
- Was it that, at the risk & cost of his life he spoke truth to power?
- Was it a combination of these that made Jesus so charismatic?

YES, YES, YES!! A THOUSAND TIMES YES TO ALL OF THESE!!

But there was something else, a *je ne c'est qua*, that drew others to him. It was his absolutely remarkable capacity to extend friendship to everyone. He was kind and compassionate to women & children, widows & orphans.

"Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight . . ."

And to all the others . . . to

- Untouchables: gentiles, lepers, the diseased, disfigured, dying and dead
- Hated tax collectors like Zacchaeus
- Prostitutes
- The shunned: like the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar
- Mary and Martha of Bethany
- And their brother, his great friend Lazarus, at whose grave Jesus wept before raising him from the dead.

He befriended common folk—his closest disciples first, last & always. "No longer do I call you servants, but friends!" And why? "Because all that the Father has shared with me, I've shared with you!"

Now, here's the take away for this morning. It was not just there & then! It is here and now. The friendship Jesus offered then he offers to us!

Mystically, he is present among us, as near as our next breath, standing at our heart's door, reaching out to us: Follow me! As I have

befriended you, now you befriend one another and those beyond this fellowship, offering wellsprings of love—inexhaustible!

It was at Camp Jo-Ota, near Clarence in northern Missouri--that first summer when I met Huckabee--that Christ touched my heart and began to stir within me the first longings to serve him full-time.

At vesper services by the lake, watching the setting sun, sitting among new friends, young

and older—the yeastiness of new life was rising within me.

That was a l-o-n-g time ago. A good deal of water has passed under the bridge and over the dam of my life since then. But I want to tell you something this morning. I recognize that it is our friendship IN CHRIST that allows us to share life at an ever-deepening level.

Has it been a l-o-n-g time for you, too? Do you feel moved in these shared moments to open your heart's door to Christ again? To re-commit yourself to friendship with him for the rest of our life's journey?

I want to give you a few moments to meditate on that where you sit . . . right now, before I close this message with prayer.

In the silence of these moments, I invite you to offer Jesus your heart once more.

SILENCE

Let us pray.

Into my heart, into my heart, come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come in today, come in to stay, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.

And then . . . Out of my heart, out of my heart, shine out of my heart, Lord Jesus. Shine out today, shine out always, shine out of my heart, Lord Jesus. Amen.

