

Friendship and Intimacy

John 15:12-15

Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese

February 23, 2014

In February 1944, when she was 13 years old, Anne Frank, a Jew who was in hiding in Amsterdam, wrote:

Today the sun is shining, the sky is a deep blue, there is a lovely breeze and I am longing--so longing--for everything. To talk, for freedom, for friends, to be alone.

And I do so long.....to cry! I feel as if I am going to burst, and I know that it would get better with crying; but I can't, I'm restless, I go from room to room, breathe through the crack of a closed window, feel my heart beating, as if it is saying, "can't you satisfy my longing at last?"

I believe that it is spring within me, I feel that spring is awakening, I feel it in my whole body and soul. It is an effort to behave normally, I feel utterly confused. I don't know what to read, what to write, what to do, I only know that I am longing. (Quoted in *Forgotten Among the Lilies*, Ronald Rolheiser, p. 7)

Ronald Rolheiser quotes Anne in his book, *Forgotten Among the Lilies*, then goes on to say, "There is in all of us, at the very center of our lives, a tension, an aching, a burning in the heart that is insatiable, non-quietable and very deep." (p. 7) Rolheiser heard in the longings of a 13 year old girl, the longings each of us have inside for union, for deep connection with others and with God. And he heard the confusion of sorting through those longings. That is the fire, the passion that drives us in our quest for love, for meaning and for relationship. It is a universal human need.

On a morning when we are talking about intimacy and friendship, it is important to name those longings and the confusion, but also to recognize that in our life time, whether we are married or single, that need for deep connection and union will only partially be met in our close relationships. Rolheiser says it well when he

says that we live "as pilgrims in time, longing for consummation in a kingdom not fully of this world, caught, in Karl Rahner's words, 'in the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable....knowing that here in this life all symphonies remain unfinished.'" (p. 3) Here in this life, our deepest needs for union will remain unmet, even if we are married.

That may sound depressing to a lot of us--a cup-half-empty kind of view. And yet, when I think about the times in my life in which I have felt a deep connection with someone, there is the high of a moment or experience of fulfillment, connection, joy, followed afterwards by a feeling of let-down, emptiness; a feeling of, 'is that all?' In that sense, the statement rings true that in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished; in this lifetime, we will never find complete fulfillment.

This statement also challenges us--invites us--to a cup-half-full view of life; times when we feel unfulfilled, lonely, empty, are opportunities to turn toward God, who can fill us in ways no human can, and invite God into that emptiness, that loneliness. We can see this emptiness as an invitation to deepen our relationship with God.

Before we go any further, I do want to make a few comments about intimacy. When I was talking about this sermon with a friend, she finally said, "Every time you say 'intimacy', I think of 'lady parts', you know, products that women need and lingerie, etc." I was a bit surprised by this, and wondered if this was another one of those Canadian/American linguistic differences! I do recognize that we tend to equate intimacy with private things, things we don't like to talk about or name out loud. We also use intimacy as the euphemism for genital sexual expression. But in this series, and particularly in this sermon, I have a broader view/definition of intimacy. In John Mast's SS class on marriage, we tried to define intimacy. Some of the words that class came up with were: trust, balance, closeness, honesty, vulnerability, respect, safety, confession, yielding, openness. Other words that could be added are reciprocity, grace, forgiveness, transparency. This is a rich definition of intimacy. What a gift to have relationships that include even half of this list!

Intimacy is all the ways in which we open ourselves up to someone else, and they open themselves up to us. Deep intimacy is not something we share with every one

we meet. In fact, we can probably only have a really deep, intimate relationship with a few people, because of the time it takes to develop that kind of relationship, but we would have varying levels of intimacy with a larger circle of people.

And I would say we need more than 1 deep intimate relationship. If we have only 1 person with whom we share everything, that for sure is better than none, but it places a lot of pressure on that one relationship to meet all of our needs for connection and union. Marriage offers the opportunity for deep connection, but if we are married, and our spouse is the only person we are being open and vulnerable with, it puts a lot of pressure on the marriage to meet all of our intimacy needs. I think of a plastic grocery bag--it can only hold so much before it stretches and eventually breaks. If you have a lot of groceries to carry, it is best to have several bags--it is easier on the bag, and if there are several bags, others can help carry it. We don't have to carry all the groceries alone, nor put everything into one bag.

OK, so intimacy is trust, vulnerability, respect, mutuality, honesty and openness. We are best served if we cultivate a number of close relationships in which we are free to be ourselves, free to be open and vulnerable.

We've also been talking about sexuality for the last few weeks, but let's examine the roots of the word. Sexuality comes from the Latin word *secare*, to cut off, to sever, to disconnect from the whole. (Rob Bell, *Sex God*, p. 40) At its root, sexuality is about being disconnected, and seeking to be re-connected. It's the awareness of how profoundly we're cut off and disconnected; and it's all the ways we go about trying to re-connect. (p. 40) And we pursue that re-connection in lots of healthy and unhealthy ways. We strive to re-connect with our world, with each other and with God. The challenge for us is that we live in a culture that says sexuality is about genital expression, and sleeping with someone is the ultimate experience of intimacy. This makes it hard for us to recognize that all of our connections with people, all of the ways in which we seek and find meaningful relationships, is our sexuality, is the expression of our desire, our drive, to re-connect. And the challenge is to know that genital union is only one way in which we find meaningful connection, but not the ultimate or only or even primary way in which we do so.

The Romantic myth or story--the one that says you need to give yourself totally to one person, that one person is enough to hold all of your needs for intimacy--that myth is strong. It has made it hard for people who aren't in a romantic relationship to feel that they have access to the kind of intimacy we are talking about, and to feel that they are valuable in and of themselves. The Romantic myth has also made it hard to separate out our need for connection from our need for sex. The Romantic myth in fact, has made the need for connection synonymous with the need for sex. And the romantic myth puts all interactions between men and women on the trajectory of marriage and sex. It says that men and women can only relate to each other in so far as they are interested in marrying the other, or at the very least, having sex with the other. If neither of those options works out, one moves on from that relationship to another one. The romantic story says it is impossible for men and women to be friends without sex getting in the way. (Dan Brennan, *Sacred Unions, Sacred Passions*, p. 34)

The other story that makes it hard for connection with others is the danger story--that is, that if 2 married people, or a single person and a married person of the opposite gender are friends, they will inevitably end up having sex. We do know the dangers of boundaries that haven't been tended and kept. This danger story has roots in reality, and so we do need to take the boundaries seriously. Or maybe rather than talking about boundaries, we could talk about covenant instead, since we have been framing this series in covenant language. So if we think about honouring covenants, our relationships as married people and with married people would also reflect the value we place in the covenants we have made, and the covenants the other person has made. We want to help each other live fully into those covenants.

The Biblical narrative is filled with friendships of deep connection and caring. The story of Ruth and Naomi, while a story of a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, uses the same language of love and clinging that is found in the Genesis verse that says a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife. Ruth clings to Naomi, echoing the kind of love and permanent attachment that hearkens back to the Genesis creation story. The story of David and Jonathan is another story of deep friendship and caring. The same language used for the love that Jonathan had

for David is the same language used for the love David had for Michal, and other OT couples had for each other: Isaac for Rebekkah, Jacob for Rachel. (Brennan, p. 102) This implies, not a sexualized love, but a love of deep compassion and caring. Again, if we think the only kind of love or friendship is the romantic kind, we miss opportunities for deep love and connection in a whole host of relationships.

Jesus also offers a model for friendship, whether cross-gender or same-gender. In our text for today, he marks his relationship with the disciples in a new way: I no longer call you servants, but friends. Based on Jesus' example of love--for them and for others--they also have a model of friendship; their relationship has moved from the unequal relationship of master and servant, to the equal relationship of friends. In essence, Jesus is saying, 'you've walked with me and learned from me, and now we are friends.' With Jesus, they have learned what it means to love with honesty, vulnerability, respect and openness; the kind of love that is vital for friendship.

And Jesus modelled the kind of friendship that reached out across barriers--treating women as human beings, rather than property, as we see in the stories of the woman at the well, Mary and Martha, the woman who washed Jesus' feet in Simon's living room, and his friendship with Mary Magdalene. But it wasn't only societal barriers that Jesus reached across; his friendship with Peter reached across the internal barriers Peter had to living honestly and openly, instilling in him confidence when it was needed, providing encouragement and correction, offering forgiveness and understanding when Peter failed to live up to his promise of following Jesus no matter what--when Peter broke his covenant of loyalty to Jesus through his denial of Jesus. In each of these situations, Jesus modelled a relationship of respect, honesty, vulnerability, and openness. He encouraged the best in the other, while maintaining his own commitments and his own call.

In Christ, the barriers of division and hostility have come down. As Christian brothers and sisters, because Jesus told a different story about friendship, we too, can tell a different story in our friendships and relationships. We can let Christ be the model for what it means for women to be friends, for men to be friends, for men and women to be friends, and for married people and singles to be friends. How are our relationships telling that new story in Christ? What might we be

missing by avoiding some friendships? How can Christ help us to tell a new story? What small step can we each take to deepen an intimate relationship--to become more vulnerable, more open, more honest?

Jesus invites us into relationships that are rich and deep; our souls long for connections that are honest and meaningful, connections that honour who we are and who the other is. Our souls long for union with others and with God. They long to feast on the abundance of God's love and provision, experienced in friendships of love and respect. May we, through our bodies and our friendships, live Christ's love and tell a new story.