

Making Friends

10/13/24

(Job 23:1-9,16-17; Mark 10:17-31) Rev. James Koyama

It may seem strange to organize today's readings around the idea of "making friends". I'd even like to be so bold as to suggest, as overly simple as it sounds, that Christianity boils down to making friends. And if you say, with who or what, I would say, potentially with everyone and everything.

Let me start with a simple example. My dog loves chasing sticks. But when we used to throw them out into the river, she would stand on the riverbank and watch with longing as the sticks floated away. At first we threw the sticks close to the bank and she went in knee deep, and then she got more courageous and began to go in farther and farther to get them. And now, when we go to the river she is like a happy otter, swimming way out to snatch the sticks and bring them back. Where once she was afraid of the river, now she is friends with it.

One of the great things about dogs is how easily we can see ourselves reflected in their behavior. I can see some of my own fears and struggles in Blaze and I am impressed by her courage. Do you remember when Jaws came out? I curse the day I first saw that movie, because ever since, I can't swim in water over ten feet deep without fighting back an

irrational fear that a shark or barracuda or some sinister creature is lurking about down there looking for a meal that looks like me.

There is a terror in being in that kind of situation, where you are out of your element, beyond your comfort zone and unable to see, like a sitting duck. That terror is well described in our reading from Job, where Job says:

If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me. If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face.

That's how I feel when I'm swimming in deep water. "Where are you Mister Great White Shark? I can't see you! Why would God create something as terrifying as you to turn the ocean into a place where I feel such an unholy fear?"

I tell myself that the movie "Jaws" is an exaggeration; that there are people who have spent their whole lives diving, who would probably be amused by my fear. They have encountered sharks before and they know how to give them proper respect and how to respond to them without panicking. In other words, they have made friends with the ocean.

Last Sunday, you may remember that the sermon was from the beginning of the book of Job, where everything was going well for him. Then God allowed everything to be taken from him and his life reduced to terrible suffering. And the question was whether Job would remain faithful or curse God and die. And in that sermon, I talked about my friend Jim who spent the last year and half of his life bedridden and in constant pain, and how, like Job, he too had to find the courage to go on in the midst of his pain.

Pain is its own deep waters, and those like Job and Jim and many of you have swum in it. You know how those jolts of pain are like sharks that circle and come at you out of the deep, or even worse, catch you unaware. And when the pain circles, we are forced to choose the spirit in which we will face it.

Will we allow it to eat away at us, bite by bite, or can we somehow learn to get along with it, even in some way befriend it? Is there some benefit in what it might teach us if we are able to see it as more than just an enemy? That's a question we can only answer for ourselves.

My reading of the message of Easter is that, when we remain faithful and continue to make friends with our world, even and especially

where pain or fear confront us, we will be vindicated for our courage; because those are actually the places where the gateway to the fullness of life, even eternal life, are revealed to us.

This is in part what Jesus is trying to tell us, after his resurrection, when he invites the Doubting Thomas to explore his wounds with his fingers and recognize him as God. With this invitation, he is also leading us deeper into the ocean of suffering, (tossing sticks farther out into the river for us, so to speak); encouraging us to make friends with the deep water where people suffer; not to desire it or to simply accept it; but to explore and to learn how to relate to it as it is, and not as we fear it to be.

This morning's Gospel reading can also be understood this way. A young man comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus lists the Commandments, and the young man answers that he has kept them all. But then, Jesus tells him that he must give all his possessions away to the poor and come follow him.

Suddenly, the young man is faced with the deep and frightening waters of life in a way he has never experienced before. Until this moment his pocketbook has shielded him from the circling sharks that afflict those

who have nothing; from hunger, homelessness and powerlessness. Like Job, before his testing, the young man has reaped only the benefits of life and never been tested by its setbacks.

But now, if he truly wants to know God and his salvation, he must explore the wounds of the world in this way in order to know what Thomas will come to know. He must leave the boat that has kept him safe and immerse himself in the deep water that is life for most people and make friends with that life. He must be baptized in those waters!

I think it is often true that, the more we have, the more we think we need and the greater is our fear of being without. And making friends with having less, frees us to rely on our friendship with God, who is the ultimate source of our security.

There are so many ways in which increasing the circle of our friendships leads to life. What would happen to our need for Army's and nuclear weapons, if we were more wholly dedicated to making friends in other nations instead of fearing them? How different would our immigration debate be, if we saw immigrants as potential friends instead of as a deadly tidal wave? How much control would our addictions really have over us, if we sought to understand them better? And if we were treat our natural environment as a friend and not as an object to be

exploited and ignored; perhaps nature would not be throwing such devastating tantrums as we witnessed down South last week, if we treated her more kindly.

Think also of all the painful gaps that lie like open wounds across our society, that could be healed if we had the courage and patience to overcome our fears and explore them. The generation gap, the urban-rural gap, the racial and cultural divides, the gap between rich and poor.

The Christian answer is that, if we look at life in all its fearsomeness, not simply as an adversary, but always as presenting us with potential friendships to be made, that our hearts will be expanded in such a way as to draw us all nearer to the heart of our God, who's love knows no boundaries.

My dog is a simple creature. As far as I can see everything for her is about friendship. She feels free and safe and at home where she is able to trust and experience friendship. And she is anxious and afraid, when she is confronted with the unknown, because she knows that there are forces that could hurt her.

But the circle in which she finds blessing grows wherever she explores the boundaries of her fears and is able to figure out how to relate to them. I see this, as I see how fully alive she is as she swims out into the river after sticks. How could she have ever known the joy and aliveness she now feels, had she never taken those baby steps and then plunged in; making friends with the cold and daunting waters.

I think that the same is true for us; that making friendships wherever possible; even in baby steps, is the challenge and adventure through which God draws us ever closer to being part of a heart as big as his (or hers). It is really another way of talking about our baptisms, by which God leads us to the fulness of life. Not just the baptism that marks us as members of the Body of Christ; but baptism as a description of what it means to follow Christ in our daily lives and as a way to enter the sacred joy of life with God.