

Acts 4:36; 9:27; 13:1-3; 16:30-40

THE SPLIT

Have you ever lost a really good friend? Perhaps I am already ahead of myself. Have you ever *had* a really good friend? Much that goes on in our society, and especially in the Christian church, seems designed to prevent deep bonds of friendship from forming. I have come into church after church and discovered that people who sit beside each other in worship and prayer, sometimes for years – people who know each other’s names, banter together, know each other’s children, and discuss the news, weather, and sports together at the coffee gathering after church many weeks a year – are still virtual strangers beneath a thin veneer. They have never been in each other’s homes. They have never shared any doubts or fears, and have therefore also never revealed their personal faith or purpose. Do you actually know why the people sitting around you have come here? Do you have any clear notion of how much they love Jesus – or how much they love *you*? And do you think it matters very much how much they love Jesus – *as long as* they love you?

Such questions will not overwhelm you. There are many strong and growing love-bonds in this congregation. But many of you have also known churches where they were few and far between. And we are not finished here either. But do you not wonder, as I wonder, why it is not obvious to everyone that Jesus wants us to have strong and powerful relationships with each other – wants us to have strong bonds of affection, obligation, purpose, and love for fellow Christians? Not all, but most of the New Testament teachings about love for others and love for neighbor – if you notice the context – are talking about love between Christians, or, in the old translations, “love of the brethren.” That did not mean everybody in general. If I said this in most any other liberal church, there would be a gasp of dismay. But why? Why do we think there should be no better friendships inside the Christian church than there are out there in the world in general? If a person joins a fellowship of Christians, should they not get something better, something different – more understanding and forgiveness and affirmation – than they get “out there” in the world in general?

It seems pretty clear to me that the early Christians thought it was really important to invite people into the faith family. A lot of it has been obscured by the growing need for creedal clarity, but the early church

mushroomed because the Message of the Gospel – with all its promises of a better life to come – was also an invitation to come be part of a community that believed it, and that was trying to live by and for this incredible new Leader, here and now. It would have seemed wrong to those early Christians to tell people about the Lord of Love yet *not* invite them to come be part of His people.

The fact is that most members of liberal churches today never invite anybody to come join their church. The reason for that is simple: They don't think it will do anybody any good. It's just a generic organization with vague notions of supporting good causes, and it's nice to have someplace to go around Christmas and Easter, or if you want your kids to be good and have someplace to get baptized or married. But they have no notion that if they brought a friend or neighbor into their church, that person would be loved, appreciated, known, encouraged, challenged, transformed ... like no place else on earth. If that were what they thought would happen, they would be using every approach they could think of to drag, haul, push, persuade, or beg the people they knew to come participate in something so vital and wonderful.

Why are we so sure that Jesus doesn't want relationships in the church to be any different, better, stronger, or more meaningful than relationships anywhere else in life? Nearly all our verbiage, programs, and concepts now assume that we are supposed to go out and do wonderful things for all the people outside the church. Almost none of them imagine that we are supposed to do anything special *inside* the church, or that bringing people into the church would do anything wonderful or special for them.

Our denominational "leaders" love to point to a few illustrations of churches that emphasize social action outside the church and are still thriving. They try to tell us this is the wave of the future. What actually happens is that a cadre of people start working together for a purpose, and this builds love-bonds that simulate some of the marks of the church for those people. And that's fine, but it will not last unless the people *being helped* are also drawn into the fellowship and its purpose – in which case, we are back to the special bonds of a faith community, but nobody is seeing or admitting it. Even then it will not last beyond the energy and charisma of whoever got it started, unless there is some real awareness of Jesus and His Holy Spirit.

Look at the life of Alexander the Great, or of Stalin, Socrates, or Andrew Carnegie. We have great scientists, artists, mathematicians, statesmen. For good or for evil, it is possible to turn military might, money, knowledge, or political position into great power. But what was the “power” that drove the mission and ministry of Jesus? Of course, we would say it was the relationship between Jesus and God – it was prayer. But what does that translate into on the earthly plane? Jesus avoided or sidestepped all the traditional methods for gaining great influence and power on this earth. He did not start a “school,” and never wrote a book. He did not raise an army, or march into battle. He did not amass a great fortune, or create or endow humanitarian organizations. He healed some people, fed some people, and made a bid to be chosen as King. But He did none of these things in traditional or expected ways, and He turned none of them into a springboard for earthly fame or power. Many of us suspect that He could have easily done any of these things, had He chosen to do so. From an earthly perspective, then, what was the source of His power and influence?

Maybe you have a different awareness, but I cannot escape it: Jesus based it all – bet His entire ministry – on the power of friendship. I know no other earth-leader of renown who did that – who trusted relationships to be that important; who trusted people to have enough loyalty or love to warrant such a strange approach. But the fact is, when Jesus ran out of time and life here, only one thing stood between Him and oblivion – only one thing made the difference between going through it all for nothing, and a Movement that would sweep the world, transforming lives wherever it went. That one thing was friendship – the love-bond between Jesus and His friends. Yes, there was the power of God. And yes, the Resurrection was impressive. I still note that only those who *already* knew and loved Jesus noticed or believed in the Resurrection. And it was *their* faith and influence that began to spread it to others. But they were not spreading theological axioms, as most of us have been told; they were not spreading creedal fortune cookies. That came later.

They were spreading the friendship, introducing people into the love-bond with Jesus. They were literally making new friends for Jesus, knowing that His love would do the same thing for others that it was doing for them, and that this friendship had become more important to them than anything else in the world – more important than life or death, and more important than pain, success, fame, fortune, prison, or disgrace. It was really quite simple. Not simplex; not easy or uncomplicated. Just

simple, pure, focused. He loved them; they loved Him back. And knowing this ... put a love-bond between them and others who knew it too. It cut through mountains of mendacity and discouragement. It still does. Slowly it pervades and changes everything we think and feel and choose and do.

It is not surprising, once we get used to it. Why would we not expect that the God of love – and the love between God and Jesus – would eventually translate into a love between us and Jesus ... and from there, to a love between us and each other? The teachings are all through the New Testament. Are they so familiar that we no longer “hear” them?

Meanwhile, Satan has worked desperately and tirelessly, as well he should, to reduce this love to something anemic, meaningless, unappealing, and powerless. First of all, love must be generic and general – love everybody the same. Secondly, the love must have nothing to do with God or Jesus. That is, you should not love a fellow Christian (or church member) more than those outside the church or outside the Faith. Our friendships for each other should never be dependent upon or inspired by a mutual awareness of the love and calling of Christ. I kid you not – that is what I have been told and taught, both subtly and blatantly, for many years now. There must be no purpose, no content, no expectation of loyalty or true caring – and especially no thought that we are bonded – because we are loyal to and trying to serve Jesus or His Kingdom. That would corrupt the relationship, imply accountability, maybe even raise the possibility that we might quarrel or have to forgive each other and try again. All such things would severely offend all notions of “unconditional love.” Besides, it’s politically incorrect to suggest or even imply that anyone or anything is more important to us than anything or anyone else.

So Satan has taken the greatest power in the world, and quietly and patiently reduced it to a mindless, meaningless, passionless pile of pablum. Is that why so many people are so unexcited about life in the church, and are bland about or even bored by the Christian Life itself? Our world is desperately hungry for love, authentic community, and meaning – and especially for some contact with God. So why are people not flocking to the church? Oh, some flock to the entertainment centers with religious themes. And to be sure, there are some real churches here and there. They prove that people *do* still flock to places of authentic faith and commitment when they figure out that something honest and real is going on. But the vast majority of churches which dot the landscape of our culture are as boring on the inside as they are on the outside.

If it weren't for the vestiges of meaning that cling from a former time, they would be dying out even faster than they are. You can go to many of them for years and never get enough love to make a single change in your life, or to put you into any danger whatsoever. And the truth is, we cannot come anywhere *close* to authentic love without having it change our lives and put us into danger.

We cannot tame Jesus down or make Him safe and comfortable. We can only lose Him, stop following Him, stop responding with the devotion and daring He requires. *“And Jesus said to them all, ‘If any of you would come after me, you must deny your self and take up your cross each day, and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it.’”* (Luke 9:23-24) How do we tame that down? How do we get it so general and generic that it doesn't mean much of anything or require much of anything, and so we can go on with business as usual?

The Christian Life all hinges on “faith.” That is why it is called “The Christian Faith.” Only, we have done away with “faith” in much the same way we have done away with “love.” We speak about “faith” as if it were a synonym for “beliefs.” Jesus died so we could have right opinions about obscure theological theories? How many times in the New Testament do you find Jesus correcting somebody's opinion about the Trinity, or the Virgin Birth, or the correct method for baptism, or the expectation of “The Rapture,” or the proper loyalty oath you must say to Him or to God in order to be saved? Jesus has no interest in such things – none, zero – unlike the vast majority of His followers. Faith is not about our theological opinions. It is about TRUST. It is about trusting God enough to put our lives into his hands so we will move, follow, risk ... dare to come alive to his direction and guidance. That is, so we will stop running our own lives – trying to control our own lives – and let God set the directions and goals.

So why love Jesus? Simple again: It was Jesus who healed the breach between me and God. Quite frankly, it would never have crossed my mind to trust God, if it had not been for Jesus. Certainly it would never have occurred to me that God loved *me* specifically, or cared about me, or had any concern or future for me whatsoever – if it had not been for the coming of Jesus. It would never have occurred to me from what I see going on in this world. Nobody ever said they *chose* me, until He came. And I'm dense; I cannot look at nature and suddenly know the love of God. All I see is everything eating everything else, just like everywhere else in this broken world.

THE SPLIT

Now, don't get me wrong. I love some of you A LOT! And I am grateful for many wonderful bits and pieces of life here. And yes, I can now see the Creator's touch in many places, and it is wonderful that the battle between light and darkness – between good and evil – is still going on here (that is, that darkness has not won, despite evidence to the contrary). But all of this, for me, is the result of His Coming. If it weren't for Jesus, there would be no light for me.

So why is faith – TRUST – so essential? Because the risk seems enormous, the danger so perilous. We cannot come anywhere *close* to authentic love without having it change our lives and put us into danger. Only, the fewer the filters between us and Jesus, the more we feel the danger of His love – even if we also know that it will bring us to Life, fill the empty places of our souls, and fill us with more joy and delight than we have ever known before.

The church as an institution tries to be calm, safe, and trouble-free. And sadly, it often succeeds beyond all expectations. But the church as the body of Christ – the People of Jesus, the faith fellowship that loves and serves its Lord and Savior – is never safe or trouble-free. And never *ever* can it rest on any laurels, as if it has become what it should be or has accomplished what it has been called to do.

Have you ever lost a really good friend? If you follow Jesus, you will have some really good friends. That is what He does – how He goes about His work. You will have friends you really and truly care about, and who you know love and care about you. If you follow Jesus, you will also lose some really good friends.

If you have ever lost a good friend, you know why so many people keep their relationships shallow and casual and pretty close to the surface. The institutional level of life hates deep love-bonds because the Judas thing hurts so much. It tears things up, and we aren't always sure what will be left after the dust settles. We like to keep it so that when squabbles, misunderstandings, or even the deep and rightful rifts occur, we can all pretend it was “nothing personal” and that the broken hearts don't count, and then we can all shake ourselves a bit and move on – without having to repent, restore trust, learn anything, or make any real difference to anything or anyone.

I have to correct a possible misconception. The love-bonds within a real church are powerful, and we must continue to trust them and put great weight on them or we cannot be the church. For that very reason, they will sometimes cause us pain. We are not God, or Jesus, and we will sometimes betray or hurt each other. We will sometimes die and leave each other. But if we correct for, or try to defend ourselves against, these temporal realities, we will weaken the love and friendships before they ever form. On the other hand, if we keep the love-bond strong with Jesus, we can survive all the desertions and problems and betrayals of this temporal realm. And in time, they will still “come round right.” It will not always be fun or nice or easy, but our true security – our love-bond with Jesus – cannot be shaken, so it will be okay.

Illustration: We honor and admire (and some of us love) the Apostle Paul. But he started out as the epitome of an outsider and enemy of the Christian church. You know about the stoning of Stephen, and how Paul was a chief ringleader among those trying to squelch the Christian Movement. And how he was on the way to Damascus to arrest and bring Christians to trial for heresy ... when he walked straight into his own encounter with Jesus.

Of course, most of the church was skeptical, thinking it was probably a pretend conversion so that Paul could get the names and locations of more Christians to arrest. That would have been *my* first thought. Sometime later, Paul goes back to Jerusalem. He is a traitor to all his former Jewish friends, and the Christians are still skeptical. At this moment, Barnabas steps in, takes a chance, gets to know Paul, ends up being his friend and sponsor, and introduces him to the other Christians in Jerusalem. We still need to be doing that, don't we? In any case, it is the beginning of a marvelous friendship.

Paul then goes back to Tarsus for maybe eight or nine years, where he rethinks everything he has been taught, and studies the Scriptures through new eyes and a new heart, now that he has met Jesus on the Damascus Road. Then one day Barnabas shows up in Tarsus, saying, “We really need you. You said Jesus had appointed you Apostle to the Gentiles. Now this is becoming a huge issue, and we need you.” So they go back to Antioch together, become influential teachers and leaders there, and ultimately are sent off together on what we call the “first missionary journey.” John Mark, a cousin to Barnabas, goes with them. He is probably a teenager at this time.

It is a very successful journey. They start churches in many places throughout the heartland of what is now Turkey. Paul is beaten, stoned, and left for dead, but he is carrying a Message of love and God's acceptance. The promise of eternal life is never easy – not if you really mean it. But there is a wrinkle. They had started on the Island of Cyprus – Barnabas' home territory – but they barely land on the southern shores of Turkey when John Mark decides he has had enough and goes home to Jerusalem.

At that moment, we do not learn of any strain between Paul and Barnabas over this desertion. But long after – when they have returned from their journey, gone to Jerusalem to explain and defend their actions, and then are back in Antioch – Paul proposes a second missionary journey. Barnabas thinks that's fine, but he wants his nephew to come along. He wants Mark to have a second chance. Paul is not willing to bring a quitter on a journey this important. He wants a companion he can count on and trust. But what about forgiveness? What about second chances? Didn't Jesus give *Paul* a second chance?

We do not know what was said. "*There arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other.*" Barnabas took Mark and went off to Cyprus, presumably to strengthen the churches there. Paul and Barnabas would never work together again. Not because of each other – because of Mark. We never hear of Barnabas' activities or efforts anymore. We *will* hear a great deal more of Paul's.

Is that painful or what? If you give it a moment's thought, you know it was sleepless nights, many prayers, and hard and painful conversations. What a shame to break up such a wonderful team. How sad, for the early church, that these two wonderful men should have such a falling out – thus calling into question the love-bonds of the church, and the power of Christ's love for us. How could Jesus let such a thing happen?

Have you ever lost a really good friend? I guess that must mean you are not a very good Christian. Or at least that's the way our world thinks. But if that's the case, then neither was Paul, or Barnabas ... or Jesus.

Would we not be more to the point to ask ourselves: If we have never lost a good friend because we were trying to stay faithful to Jesus, are we really among His faithful followers? Why do we always want to assume that God calls us to the namby-pamby life? Or that God calls us to a life where we will make no mistakes, or will always be right? Which

one was in the right, Paul or Barnabas? I have never been in a discussion group that, when studying these passages and getting involved enough to be really sad at this break between Paul and Barnabas, did not end up siding with Barnabas. Paul should have forgiven Mark. Paul was in the wrong. It has always been interesting to me how many people seem eager to put Paul in the wrong, for a whole host of reasons. Interesting because I have little confidence that we would be here – that we would ever have heard of Jesus – except for Paul. Paul was nothing without Jesus; there would have been no Message to carry, no Gospel to proclaim, nothing to risk so much for, or about. But Paul, more than any other person of his generation, does seem to be responsible for this news breaking beyond Judaism and into the Gentile world.

So, Barnabas was right, but Paul is the reason we know about Jesus? Interesting. If Barnabas was right, Lord please help us to be wrong more often.

We hate it when friendships break. It is one of the most painful things in life. We hate it when two people we love divorce, or when friends we admire part company or purposes or end up on opposite sides of important issues. But sometimes it is necessary. The road forks, and if you care – if you are truly alive – then you have to take your best choice and trust the Lord ... even in this. How grateful I am that Paul did not turn back, even to keep the peace. How grateful I am that Jesus did not turn back, even to keep the peace with scribes and Pharisees, with His mother, with His own brothers, or even at one point with Peter.

So we are back to it once again. The primary relationship must always come first, or there is no hope of true reconciliation. The peace of the moment is never as important as the Peace of the Kingdom. What we pretend or fake or jerry-rig to make look pleasant or nice does not lead to Life. And so the real split we care about – the real broken relationship we are no longer willing to leave unconfessed or unrepented or unhealed – is the one between ourselves and God. If we take care of that, all the lesser rifts can be healed between us. So we turn again to the One who reconciles us to God.