Follow the friendships

By Jonathan Melton
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At lunch with a friend recently, I asked him about his first few years in campus ministry. It's been wonderful, he said. "Slow, patient, immensely rewarding. Frustrating. Growing." Like me, my friend's work on campus is of the church-planting kind. We started talking about learnings.

I mentioned my from-time-to-time loneliness. Not the loneliness of physically being alone. Blessedly, I am surrounded by students, colleagues, friends, and a small army of alumni and supporters from local (and increasingly not-so-local) churches. No, the particular loneliness I shared with my friend comes from the commitment to continually challenge my imagination for living on the edges of a missional understanding: being with and for others—especially neighbors, unhooking the ministry of St. Francis House from the predictable ecclesial tropes of guilt, judgment, and the preservation of the institution. "No strings," our students call it.

We haven't mastered "no strings." Indeed, my prayer is that we wouldn't ever master it, so much as it would master us. We aren't there yet, but we are committed to becoming so mastered. We aren't better at this vision than anyone else, but we are beginning to get to a place where we can see that to be committed to this vision will entail not being as committed to other things traditionally associated with the good work of the church. For example, we don't do many meetings, and I don't value conference tables in our space. (Looking ahead to the fall, I think most of the conversations worth having in the life of the Episcopal Center will happen on walks, because it's simply silly to keep meeting *here* to talk about living life *there*. Meeting, not meetings.)

It's the unhooking that's lonely.

The unhooking is also exceedingly good and incredibly energizing. The unhooking is what opens me to receive the gospel again through the fresh eyes of my students. The unhooking is what challenges me to receive new possibilities of the gospel. The unhooking is what finally lands me outside of my head and, reliably, outside of my

comfort zone. To forsake one's comfort zone is to discover new life. And also to be, from time to time, lonely.

My friend expressed some resonance with my loneliness. Unexpectedly, he said that the next time God calls him to an adventure in ministry, he'll start with a team of friends. Not building and becoming friends with members of a team, but starting with a team of friends committed to a common focus. "Why wouldn't I, if I could?" he asked.

My friend got me thinking. When Jesus sent the disciples out, two by two, I wonder how they paired up. Did Jesus have to pull the old youth group schtick and count them off one, two, one, two, one, two? Did James and John lock eyes the moment Jesus announced the mission, to seal their partnership in silence? Did Judas look around with a lonely hopelessness, with no one there to match his gaze? Surely Jesus let them go out as friends.

I won't speak for other denominations, but the polity of the Episcopal Church does not put a premium on partnered friendship in (at least) ordained ministry. Notoriously, seminarians are counseled not to trust the laity with vulnerable friendship, and often for good reasons. Some churches can still afford assistants, but that number is small and shrinking. (Thus, "clericalism" in the life of the church usually indicates a dynamic around a cleric, singular, because the laity, broadly speaking, see little in the way of relationship modeled by clergy.) Large staffs are luxuries.

Even with large staffs, the best scenario—ordinarily—is that one is able to grow the *possibility* of friendship across the staff with which a rector surrounds herself. Rarely, if ever, does the church start with and build on friendships. The old school custom in which staff submitted their resignations to incoming rectors is the closest thing I can find in the habit and practice of the church that would make beginning with friendship possible (bringing in one's own friends). To say that bygone practice is not now fondly regarded is of course an understatement.

That the church rarely starts with friendship is curious to me, because Paul says that the ministry Christ invites us to share is the ministry of reconciliation. It is hard to imagine real reconciliation without friends (or enemies, for that matter, which is a challenge surely requiring the presence and honesty of holy friends).

To be sure, one of the great lessons of church is that we don't pick Jesus' friends. I remind myself daily that I am likely a friend someone wishes Jesus hadn't chosen. As Will Willimon might say, "You want Jesus? You're stuck with the church." Indeed, unexpected friendships are one of the great gifts of being Christian. But even Willimon spent the better part of several decades working with his close friend Stanley Hauerwas. It seems silly to enter work this challenging apart from the presence of existing friends.

A friend of mine recently told me that her rector had left her church to take another position. To make matters worse, she said, within a week the assistant left, too. While recognizing and discussing the real pastoral challenges such a congregation faces, I eventually smiled and said, "You have such a gift." "What do you mean?" my friend asked me. "Y'all are financially sound. You warrant two clergy. It's just bad luck, really. No scandal of leadership. That means you can tell the next rector of your parish that she can pick a friend to work with. Do you know that most of us can go a lifetime in ministry without ever having that opportunity?"

In the New Testament church, discernment for ordination appears to have been an only slightly fancier version of this: some apostle would come upon a person of faith from the community of faith and ask herself or himself some version of the question, "Would I take her or him along with me? Is this a friend with which I'd enroll in this thankless task?" It wasn't a rhetorical question. It was an actual question necessitated by the assumption that ministry required friends. The modern laying on of hands—an important sticking point in ecumenical conversations for Episcopalians—can be seen as a (perhaps) too diluted version of being willing to touch and be with this person—to claim them as a friend in ministry.

And of course good clergy will rightfully invest much to cultivate friendships among themselves and so will find unofficial spaces between the letters of the polity to generate ministries born of friendship. An interesting question, though, is how a reimagined polity could actually legitimate and encourage this energy and its subsequent ministries. Projects such as The Easter People Podcast are demonstrating that the work of friends is often inherently compelling and interesting to the rest of us, for they show us what it looks like to act and imagine creatively with others, which is a necessary prerequisite to being God's public people in the world.

When LeBron James famously took his "talents to South Beach," the decision was monumental not because of the botched ESPN public relations disaster, but because it was the first time someone with James' ceiling chose winning and playing with friends over maximum earnings and perceived legacy. At the time, conventional wisdom held that the Miami Heat wouldn't be able to afford anyone beyond their "Big 3." In fact, the opposite turned out to be true: countless skill players lined up for a chance to play with a team they recognized to be built on friendship, sacrifice, and the best chance to do something special.

My sense is that more and more young Christians—like my friend and me—would be seriously willing to entertain the kind of decision LeBron made, foregoing traditional prizes of reputation and wealth in exchange for the opportunity to live the gospel with friends. The willingness of these Christians to forgo reputation and wealth is a good thing, because if ministry wasn't going to make you rich before, I have no idea how the kind of friendships-in-ministry I'm proposing pay the bills. But exactly for these reasons, they will be teams capable of the sacrifices only friends can make: "greater love has no one than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends." And teams of friends engaged in sacrifice for love of Christ and the gospel will, indeed, do something special.

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