

FRIENDSHIP POWER

I was not really watching the Rose Bowl game. The television was on, but I was not paying very close attention. I was over at the dining-room table trying to sort through and organize three years of sermons so I could take them to the Comstock Bindery. It's cheaper if you do it three at a time. But what a pile of paper! Amazing how much I write in a year, and I don't even think of myself as a writer. Sometimes I see that row of twenty-eight volumes of sermons on my bookshelf and think, "What a waste. If I had put that same effort into publishing five or six books instead, maybe I would have amounted to something."

To be sure, in no sane moment do I feel that way. I like my life. "I would rather be a sermon writer in the house of the Lord ..." than whatever else, wherever else. I'm just saying that I was preoccupied and not paying close attention to the television.

Later that evening, some of the things that had been coming across on television started drifting back through my mind. There were the two football teams striving with might and main to gain ascendancy over each other. Subplots were going on, and the reputations of coaches and of players were being made. Here were people risking life and limb for career, for fame, for approval, for each other. And then I recalled hearing an ad – I think it was John Hancock trying to sell its investment advice. There was something in it about "competition is what fuels America and makes her great" (I'm paraphrasing).

And then I recalled some athlete who came on a couple of times in a different ad. I don't know what he was selling, but I guess he had been well known in his day and now he was retired and he was saying, "What do I want to be remembered for? For being a good husband and a good father. That's life ... what it's about." He was saying something like that.

Belatedly I came awake. Strange juxtaposition. What was this unusual piece of sanity doing in the midst of a national New Year's Day broadcast? Somebody had moved beyond the normally accepted American scenario. Here was the suggestion that the sports lottery, the competition, and the festive atmosphere of the bowl games did not reflect the true values of life after all. Heresy! Now I wished I had been paying attention. Who said that? Why was he saying it? Did he mean it?

Being a good husband and a good father was more important than winning a bowl game or any other of our culture's big prizes?

Anyway, it's delightful when something or someone manages to call the issue into focus. I doubt that many young men in America today grow up dreaming of being good husbands and good fathers with the same eager zeal or dedication that they grow up thinking and training to be athletes or to be rich or "successful." This thing about husband and father is a strange new note from a different list of values. And it's not just about these two roles. The eerie thing is the suggestion that *relationships* may be more important than other kinds of power, success, rewards, recognition. Maybe competition is what fuels America, and maybe that's what's wrong. On Sunday mornings we talk like we are supposed to be fueled by love, which is a relational power rather than a success or wealth or prominence kind of power. No doubt there is a lot of love and friendship behind the scenes of a bowl game. But that's exactly where it is: behind the scenes. What would happen if love and relationships were the *real* value, and competition and success and striving for fame were only behind the scenes here and there? Wouldn't that be a whole different kind of culture to live in and experience? Can you imagine young men and woman out every afternoon for two or three hours, strenuously training to become thoughtful, sensitive, loyal friends; to become skilled mates; to become wise, calm, loving parents?

It is all interesting, intriguing, and irrelevant musing – until I begin to realize that it was just such a far-out, new, total revamping of all existing values that was occurring in and around the coming of Jesus Christ. The fastest way to become aware of how unique and strong the shifting was is to ask: What kind of power was Jesus depending on? The correct and instant answer is that Jesus was depending on the power of God.

Now that we got an "A" in Sunday School, let's ask the question again. Clearly Jesus trusted and obeyed God like no other mortal ever has, before or since. Nevertheless, God gave Jesus a task – a mission and a ministry – to accomplish on earth. The question is: What sort of "power" here on earth did Jesus bank on for the accomplishment of His task?

We know this was a huge issue with Jesus and that He prayed and thought and worked at it all the time. It started out with forty days in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan to base His ministry

on feeding hungry people; on political or military might; on spiritual power or the ability to do miracles. While Jesus was involved in all of these activities at moments, clearly He rejected them all as the basis of His ministry. They were not the kind of power He sought or trusted. That in itself is astounding, amazing, incredible. The church has yet to figure out how to shift and stay shifted from the old ways of power to the new.

So Jesus does not choose wealth. He does not choose military might. He does not choose political organization. He does not choose the influence of the religious institution. He does not choose the power of the pen. This last is more complex. One way to gain power and influence is to become a great writer, speaker, or teacher. Jesus does no writing, nor does He allow anybody else to write for Him during His lifetime. He speaks and teaches a lot, but that is not the foundation of His ministry. That is, He does not set up an intellectual school of thought, nor does anybody in His lifetime consider that learning certain teachings or answers is what He came for. He proclaims a new Kingdom to be entered here and now. He speaks of rebirth – a coming to see everything new – that allows us to enter this Kingdom. But with Jesus, the focus is not the teachings or Himself. The focus is on each person getting into this new Kingdom – into the presence of a God of love.

That's right back to the question: What is the power? God's power, of course! But what sort of power on earth will Jesus use to accomplish His ministry? The answer, unbelievably but I think inescapably, is friendship: Friendship Power. Jesus bets His whole mission on the power of friendship. Jesus makes friends on purpose. These friends seem to count His friendship as the best and most important thing that has ever happened to them. And when Jesus leaves this realm called "earth," there is only one thing under Heaven that remains to make His coming worthwhile, remembered, and viable for the future: His friendships. His friends will carry on what He has started, or it will all be for nothing and come to nothing. That has been true from that first Easter morning until this very moment. Jesus bets every last ounce of it on Friendship Power. Some of us are increasingly eager to be among His band of friends.

So, no books; no military establishment; no new form of government; no new "school of thought"; no wealth to perpetuate a new clan or movement; no new religious establishment. There are bits and seeds of all of these things, of course. And the followers,

not paying close attention, have tried them all. And again and again this has thrown things out of focus or all off track. Some followers have tried to build it on military might, and some on a new organization or churchly institution. Some have tried to put all the weight of it on a Book. And on and on. Jesus built it on the power of friendship, and I strongly suspect that this is what Jesus still counts on. *Go thou and do likewise.*

What does Jesus Himself do that supports such a view? We can begin with Mark's Gospel: "*Then he went up into the hill-country and summoned the men he wanted, and they came and joined him. He appointed twelve to be his companions, and to be sent out to proclaim the gospel, with authority to drive out demons. The twelve he appointed were: Simon, whom he named Peter; the sons of Zebedee, James and his brother John, whom he named Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed him.*" (Mark 3:13-19)

Jesus begins where John the Baptist left off. Most of the followers of John end up in Jesus' camp. For a time at least, Jesus' ministry grows quickly. Some are drawn by the teachings; some by the miracles; some by curiosity; some because they wonder if maybe He is the Messiah. But lots and lots of people are attracted and eager to be part of whatever He is doing on some level. In the midst of this excitement, Jesus picks twelve to be His special friends – the inner group. There seems to be no doubt about it. In all the records and traditions, it is clear that Jesus has this clique, this inner circle, this primary small group out of which He operates. *Go thou and do likewise.*

You must wonder, as I have often wondered: What did Jesus do about the jealousy and resentment and feelings of exclusiveness that must have resulted? What happened to the people who wanted to be in the inner twelve but did not get picked? Did they stomp off in anger, or did they go on helping as much as they could? We are given no hint on the subject. But we are given a hint on another subject.

When Jesus sends His followers out for a "solo flight" to test their wings – to preach and to heal – He first sends the twelve. They do very well indeed. Jesus has taught them, and they are quite amazed at their own abilities. The very next thing Jesus does is send out a *further* seventy-two to do the same thing. And they also do very well. (Luke 10:1)

Where did the seventy-two come from, how did they get trained, and how is it that they are also clearly and effectively under Jesus' orders? These are the disciples of the disciples. Jesus picks twelve, and each of the twelve picks an additional six. What Jesus teaches His twelve, His twelve each teach to their six.

There are many, many leaders who can gather a following and form a movement, and everything goes okay until the leader is lost. Then the movement falls apart – dwindles away. Only a handful in history have had genius enough to turn followers into apostles – to teach disciples until they themselves are teachers. But Jesus does that, and Christendom depends upon it. Every person in Christendom is supposed to be part of a small group where they are being taught. As quickly as possible, they are also to be in another small group where they are teaching others.

It was important from the beginning for people to gather to hear Jesus preach and teach. The crowds would come together and that was exciting, and sometimes there were miracles or sometimes they ate together and it was celebration and worship. And later, when one of the apostles or a noted teacher came through town, everybody would gather to listen, to eat, to share the day together. The church has continued doing that, of course. It is fun and instructive and encouraging for the whole community of believers together. It needs to happen frequently.

But we have the whole thing sitting on this function, and it will not bear the weight. It is the secondary function. We have the emphasis on the wrong syl-LA-ble. The *real* core of it is the small group – the Disciple Band: the seven to twelve friends. That is where the real training takes place; where the real friendships are formed; where the power and endurance and caring and accountability come from. (They come from the Holy Spirit, of course, but even the Spirit uses context.)

If your spiritual life is not growing as fast as you would like or if you are not excited and enthusiastic about your faith, nine times out of ten this is where the link is missing. You are supposed to be in a small group of seven to twelve followers – where bonds are strong, people come to know each other well, loyalties are powerful, and you know you can share anything. And then – not when you are “ready” or perfect or “superior,” but as soon as you catch your breath – it is time to befriend others until you have a Disciple Band of your own.

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You do not leave your original Disciple Band (although sometimes the Spirit may scatter it). You need both. Keep trying for both. One in which you are primarily nurtured, and one in which you are primarily a nurturer.

We enter a new year together. I thought last year was pretty good, all things considered. At least I have a lot of gratitude and good memories and a realization of having learned a lot. I hope this year we can be bolder and braver about following Jesus, seeing that we have survived our previous efforts to do so. The area I hope challenges us the most is this matter of learning to put our weight, our hopes, and our dreams on Friendship Power.

The first and easiest and most obvious test of that, as far as our church life is concerned, is found in whether or not you are part of some “small group” of friends within the church. If not, our church life is at half-mast, and our progress in the faith will be slow and erratic.

It is a new year. Get yourself into a small group within the church while there is still time. If you cannot find one or do not like the kind you find, design and form one of your own. The most important thing you can do for yourself and for the Kingdom this year is to become part of an active, intentional, loyal Disciple Band. It doesn't matter whether you call it a study group, fireside gathering, club, clique, koinonia group, or prayer group – whatever. But it ought to meet at least twice a month and, next to your immediate family, it should be the place where you are most eager to learn and to love.

Go thou and do likewise.