

CTC BULLETIN

VOL. XXII, No. 2 August 2006

Blessed Are Friends of God!

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Friendship in the Biblical Tradition

The biblical passages of Isaiah 41:8, Luke 12:4 and III John 15 have one thing in common. They are about friendship, a special kind of friendship. What we envision here is not mere friendship between two individuals but God's friendship with Abraham, Jesus' friendship with his disciples, and the Christians' mutual friendship. These themes have been seldom discussed in theological discourse, rarely highlighted in the life of the church, and hardly elevated to the rank of a Christian motto to live up to. But I think these biblical references help us tap a field of the precious tradition of faith in Christianity, which conceptualizes and imagines our multiple relationships in life and with life in terms of friendship.

In the Old Testament, the title "friend of God" mostly signifies special favor and individualized election. The sovereign God befriends outstanding individuals, such as Abraham with extraordinary faith and loyalty (Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23), or Moses with extraordinary leadership. Exodus 33:11 says, "The Lord spoke with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend". A kind of democratization of divine friendship already

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occurred in the Old Testament as we see in Psalms 25:14, "The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them." But it was in the intertestamental period, especially in wisdom theology, that this divine friendship became more and more democratized. "Wisdom is an unfailing treasure for mortals: those who get it obtain friendship with God" (Wisdom 7:14). "In every generation she [Wisdom] passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God" (Wisdom 7:27). In the tradition of wisdom theology, divine friendship is no longer restrained to a few heroic outstanding persons, but extended to a larger circle of people who long for wisdom and make themselves the residence of wisdom.

In the gospels, we see a radical development of friendship. Above all, Jesus' disciples have become his friends (John 11:11). "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:14). Even Judas, the betrayer, is called a friend by Jesus (Matthew 26:50). Jesus interprets his death as the death of a friend for his friends. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). What is most striking, however, is that beyond the circle of his disciples, Jesus builds a friendship with tax collectors and sinners. "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Luke 7:34). Against this charge, Jesus finds the rationale for his activity in wisdom theology saying that "wisdom is vindicated by all her children" (Luke 7:35). Here, true wisdom is found not so much in deploying political skills for individualistic promotion in society as in building friendship with the marginalized and the despised.

Finally, we turn to the early Christianity. The most favorite terms and images that the early Christians adopted to describe the relationship of believers in the community were family-oriented. Many of them perceived themselves as members of the alternative family of God. However, expressions of friendship, embedded in Greco-Roman culture and reinterpreted in Christian perspective, abound in the letters of the New Testament. The reference from the Third Letter of John explicitly demonstrates the currency of this friendship culture in early Christianity. It is important to note that without what can be named "comradely friendship" of Christians, early Christianity would have never succeeded in spreading the good news

far and wide throughout the Mediterranean world. We discover this feature particularly in the letters of Paul. They mention Prisca and Aquila who “risked their necks” for the life of Paul the apostle (Romans 16:4). Epaphroditus is called Paul’s “fellow soldier” (Philippians 2:25). Andronicus and Junia were in prison together with Paul (Romans 16:7). All these passages carry the language of “comradely friendship.”

Necessity of Friendship for Contemporary Human Society

We have seen sufficient biblical underpinnings of the theme of friendship. It covers a wide range of subjects in the spectrum between the divine and the human, between the communal and the individual, and between the intimate and the strange. To speak frankly, up to a certain point of my life, I had never ventured to imagine my relationship with God in terms of friendship. But when I came to a stage where friendship mattered enormously in every area of my life, this biblical tradition of friendship began to capture my attention and play a significant role in my spirituality and life. For me, friendship is the love of the other with profound respect, whether this other is human or divine, personal or impersonal. Friendship entails fascination with and faithfulness towards the other. It loyally helps the other to accomplish his or her own vocation or destiny. Yet it does not expect monotonous sameness from the other, because the merit of friendship grows by the mutual trust in the fact that difference complements and enriches each other. It is based on mutual understanding and knowledge, but it does not condescend to exhaust the mystery of the being of the other, neither does it stifle the freedom of the other to be different. The sense of awe and mystery abides in friendship. Friendship is not only about intimacy and familiarity, but also about respect of distance and strangeness. It values the importance of community without disregarding the unique individuality of each human being. Friendship evokes intense compassion, but reserves the room for detachment, which enables independent reflections to unfold. Friendship blooms in the interdependence of independent beings. The art of friendship can be extended to our relationship with impersonal beings such as our own body and nature.

I came from Korea, a country where people suffer from many conflicts of human relationship, in addition to other problems. The trouble of human life in Thailand must take

different shape, but I think that there is no society free from the dilemmas arising from personal and social relationships. My belief is that one of the answers to the problems of relationship could be found in our capability to nurture friendship. For instance, the relationship between men and women is an area which very urgently requires the art of friendship. Recently, divorce rate has been rocketing in Korea. Each case has different reasons, but statistics says that marriage of those who have not learned the craft of open, honest and sincere conversation, which is the basic skill for friendship, becomes very vulnerable and fragile to threats from the vicissitudes of life. Especially in patriarchal society, men are not socialized to let women talk and listen to what they talk, and women are not encouraged to speak up for themselves, claiming independently their own views of life. In such a culture of one-sided domination, the skill for a productive conversation to deepen human relationship cannot appear out of the blue suddenly in marriage. This lack of basic resources to maintain human relationship creatively, i.e. this dark side of patriarchy, makes both husband and wife its victims, often leading the marriage to a virtual death or dissolution.

Furthermore, capitalistic society makes a fetish of mammon. It not only turns women's body into pornographic impersonal commodity and sanctions the industry of prostitution, but it also accelerates the commercializing of human relationships in general. Without active awareness of its danger, genuine friendship among people who are socialized in the capitalistic and patriarchal system becomes less feasible. The building of alternative community begins with our capability to help each member restore one's own authentic irreplaceable voice, our active listening to each other, and our willingness to nurture friendship with others.

Art of Friendship for the Journey of Faith in the Empire

Friendship is the very art that we, Asian Christians, need to cultivate and hone in many dimensions of life as we engage in the journey of faith in the empire. Above all, our faith in God requires the art of friendship. Our faith in God is turbulently tested when so many innocent people in Asia, as well as in other parts of the globe, continue to suffer from hurricanes, earthquakes, hunger, poverty, religious genocide, and all kinds of disastrous

fallout from the wars they never initiated. The traditional doctrine about the goodness of God doesn't work in this kind of situation but rather increases our sense of frustration and cognitive dissonance. Nevertheless, Christians are those who cannot stop calling and trusting God, even though going through what the mystics call "the dark night of soul." We cry over what is felt as the absence of God. By doing this, we lament, ironically, "before God." We Christians somehow confess with Paul the apostle that "we are perplexed but not driven to despair" (2 Corinthians 4:8). To confess this is to practice the art of friendship with God, because friendship signifies faithfulness and trust despite the acknowledgement of the distance and the partial unfathomableness. Biblical faith is originally characterized by struggle, as it is revealed in the story of Jacob turned Israel. After Jacob wrestled with God until daybreak, his hip was put out of joint. He came to be given a new name, Israel, because he had striven with divine and human beings and prevailed (Genesis 32:28). Staying the course with struggle characterizes both faith and friendship.

The interpretation of the Bible also invokes the art of friendship. For Christians, the Bible is the word of God which holds the power of salvation and liberation. However, this same Bible has been employed in history to sanction an imperialistic and ethnocentric belief in the inferiority of the Asian peoples and the deficiency of Asian cultures. Therefore, the relationship of Asian Christians with the Bible cannot be overly simple. It is imperative to form an interpretive space in which a critical and creative evaluation of the Bible can take place, which attends not only to the confessional reality of faith communities but also to the public political function of the Bible. Such an interpretive space resembles the spirit of friendship, which is imbued with fascination and compassion, while maintaining independent reflections.

Finally, we Asian Christians who attempt to resist against the hegemony of the empire, and seek to work for the building of alternative globalization and alternative community, need particularly "comradely friendship." It means tender love among friends, united with undaunted commitment to the shared vision. We already saw that the early Christian movement was deeply indebted to the "comradely friendship" among fellow Christians. Of course, "comradely friendship" is not a monopoly of Asian Christians. One year before his death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well-known German theologian who resisted against the

regime of Hitler at the risk of his own life, composed a poem, titled *The Friend*. It highlights the “comradely” part of friendship:

Distant or near in joy or in sorrow,
each knows in the other his loyal helper
to freedom and humanity.

In Korea, ecumenical Christians’ engagement in the independence movement during Japanese colonialism and the democratization process in the 1970s and 80s, gave birth to a number of beautiful stories of “comradely friendship”. One story is that of a friend protecting another friend at the risk of his or her own life, and thus practicing Jesus’ saying on friendship. They didn’t fear those who “kill the body and after that can do nothing more,” and were ready to lay down their life for their friends (Luke 12:4; John 15:13). Extraordinary circumstances produced extraordinary friendship, through which we can glimpse the presence of divine love among us. There are, of course, other beautiful stories of Christian friendship which takes place in ordinary times. These stories are inspiring, and I am sure that you, Christians in Thailand, are also blessed with your own extraordinary friendship stories which empower and nurture you. It would not be too farfetched to say that the future of ecumenical Christianity in Asia partly depends on how faithful network of “comradely friendship” we can build both locally and globally, both intermurally and interreligiously, as we struggle against the multiple oppressions in Asia and strive for the fullness of life for all.

Conclusion

We have been ushered into the third millennium. Its beginning is characterized by violence, war and terror, neo-liberalism, conflicts in many areas of life, disintegration of communities, ecological crisis, and so on. The post-colonial Asia is still haunted by the ghosts of manifold colonialisms. What resources do we have to confront and struggle with this reality? I hope that we could hone the art of befriending people, God, and the Bible, and that it would help to increase our dynamic strength in faith with which we could deal with Asian reality creatively. With the help of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God, the art of friendship may

continue to enrich our life in fullness, so that we might continue to work for the fullness of life for all. "Blessed are friends of God!"