

Living as the Friends of God

BY PAUL J. WADELL

James calls the Church to be a living sacrament of friendship with God, a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a more promising and truly human way of life. This is what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.

Words like these from the letter of James are guaranteed to wake up a slumbering congregation on any Sunday morning: “Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4). Never one to mince words, James exclaims that every Christian has a choice: we can choose either to be friends of the world or friends of God; but we cannot select both because each leads to very different, and indeed irreconcilable, ways of life. The friends of God are “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). They promise “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27). Friendship with the world breeds “envy and selfish ambition” and “disorder and wickedness of every kind” (3:16), while friendship with God is characterized by peace, gentleness, mercy, and righteousness (3:17).

To enter into a friendship is to take up a new way of life because every friendship in some way reorders our lives and creates new commitments and responsibilities. Too, friendships change us because they form our character, shape our beliefs and convictions, and encourage certain kinds of behavior in us.¹ As the letter of James testifies, this is especially true when the overriding commitment of our lives is to live in faithful friendship with God. One liability of speaking of friendship with God is that it can sound so abstract—so impossibly spiritual—that it can seem to have no practical con-

sequences for one's everyday life. We can think that friendship with God takes us out of the world instead of calling us to live in it in a very different way. The letter of James blasts this assumption by continually emphasizing that friendship with God is a distinctive and very challenging way of life characterized by specific habits and practices. It is a way of life that will transform us, sometimes in startling ways, by cultivating in us attitudes, dispositions, and behavior quite at odds with those who choose to make friends of the world. To enter into friendship with God, James assures us, is not to be introduced to a cozy and always reassuring life; rather, it is to become part of a community committed to embodying and practicing God's ways in the world. It is a community characterized by mercy rather than judgment (2:13); deep concern for the poor (2:15-16); patience in suffering (5:7-11); solicitude for the sick (5:14-15); and fraternal correction (5:19-20).

For James, this is the identity and mission of the Church. The Church is the community of the friends of God called to embrace, imitate, and represent Christ to others by witnessing the ways of Christ in their everyday lives. This is why for James a life of discipleship *is* a life of friendship with God, and why friendship is central to James's understanding of a faithful Christian community. Just as Abraham was rightly "called the friend of God" (2:23) because his faith was exemplified in his works, the Church is the community of the friends of God whose faith is manifest in its commitment to carry forward Jesus' ministry in the world. Put more strongly, the vocation of the Church is to be a sacrament—a compelling sign—of friendship with God. When the Church is this kind of community it offers the world something powerfully hopeful.

WHAT FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD REQUIRES AND MAKES POSSIBLE

We can more fully appreciate James's vision of the Church by examining how a life of friendship with God was understood by two of the most influential theologians of the Church, Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Book VIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine's famous account of the first thirty-three years of his life, concludes with the story of his conversion. Book IX focuses on his life immediately after his conversion. Baptized at Easter in 387 by Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, Augustine begins to live the Christian life in a small community that included his mother, Monica, his close friend, Alypius, his brother, Navigius, his son, Adeodatus, two of his cousins, and two of his students. Like any real community (or any real congregation), Augustine and his cohorts hardly agreed on everything. But they were able to live together well because they were joined as one in what they took to be the fundamental calling of their lives, namely, to love God and to grow together in Christ. Friendships form around shared goods and purposes. We become friends with some persons rather than others not only because something about them attracts us, but also because we see in them cares and commitments similar to our own. At the deepest level, friends

share a vision of life, an understanding of what matters most in life, and a desire to help one another achieve it. This was eminently true of Augustine's fledgling community. Their heartfelt love for God and passionate desire to help one another grow in the holiness of Christ overshadowed whatever differences and disagreements might have existed among them, and did not allow those differences and disagreements to imperil their life together. Like James's community of the friends of God, they were able to live in peace and harmony with one another because Christ was the foundation and center of their lives.²

Ten years after his baptism, Augustine wrote a rule of life for Christian communities that was inspired by Acts 4:32. Just as the first Christians "were of one heart and soul," Augustine believed that Christians in their lives together were to love God and be of "one heart and soul" on their journey to God. Like any good friends, they were to support and encourage one another, seek the best for each other, challenge and sometimes correct one another, and in everything to help one another grow in the way of love. In many respects, Augustine sees Christian community like a choir singing in harmony. Each voice brings its own distinctive gift to the choir; each voice makes its unique but indispensable contribution. And all those voices blending together create something beautiful. As a community of the friends of God, the Church is a choir of varied voices bonded together in love to create something beautiful and rich and hopeful not only among themselves, but also for the world.

And yet, no matter how appealing Augustine's vision of Christian communities might be, it may strike us as sadly naïve and hopelessly sentimental, especially when we consider how hard it is today to get people to be of "one heart and soul" about anything. This is true not only in society, but sometimes also in our neighborhoods, families, and even in our churches. Like James's account of those who live in friendship with the world rather than God, our lives today are often characterized by deception and mistrust, harshness and animosity, and discord and negativity more than love, kindness, truthfulness, patience, faithfulness, and compassion. Moreover, unlike Augustine's Christian communities, our lives together are often not rooted in the rich and substantive goods that lead to peace, contentment, and genuine joy. The letter of James—and Augustine's rule of life for Christian communities—remind us that status, prestige, wealth, celebrity, and possessions cannot give us the happiness that comes from loving and being loved by God, and loving one another as a fellow friend of God. And so today it is not surprising that so many people are lonely, and wonder if anyone truly knows them, despite all the technology that is supposed to connect us and bring us closer together. Neither is it surprising that people may be entertained, stimulated, and endlessly distracted, but nonetheless are haunted by an emptiness and desolation that mask a deepening despair. This is why James's vision of the Church, as well as Augustine's description of Christian

community, are utterly indispensable. If the Church is faithful to its calling, in their lives together Christians show that genuine community is possible, that we are happiest when we do not allow anything to become more important than our mutual love for God, and that people really can live together in peace. Instead of surrendering to the discord, polarization, fear, and anxiety of the age, Christian communities are called to counter and overcome them by faithfully embracing and exemplifying all that it means to live in friendship with God.

CALLED TO FRIENDSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas provides an even fuller and more richly developed account of a life of friendship with God that can enhance our understanding of James's theology of the Church. Aquinas taught that human beings are created for, and find happiness in, fellowship and communion with God. We are made for intimacy with God, fashioned for friendship with God, because nothing less than God will content us, nothing other than God will bring us peace. For Aquinas, our most exquisite good comes from participating, as deeply as possible, in the love, goodness, and happiness that is God's very life. We are fulfilled and perfected when we who are loved and cherished by God love and cherish God in return. We find joy when we seek and delight in God's good just as God seeks and delights in ours. That is the language of friendship, and for Aquinas it is the most fitting way to understand the Christian life. We who are the children of God are called to become the friends of God. Indeed, Aquinas described the theological virtue of charity as friendship with God, a way of life in which all of us *together* come to love God and all that God loves.

In his analysis of charity, Aquinas said that what distinguishes friendship with God from other friendships is the shared good or "communication" on which it is based. Charity is friend-

ship between God and human beings constituted by God sharing with us the very life and happiness that is God. As Liz Carmichael explains, "God imparts or communicates his 'beatitude,' his joyful life to us; and through this transforming gift we are enabled to share the divine life actively with him."³ In the *communicatio* that establishes charity-friendship with God, God draws to us in love, welcomes us into the divine life, and offers us every-

We find joy when we seek and delight in God's good just as God seeks and delights in ours. That is the language of friendship. We who are the children of God are called to become the friends of God.

thing that is of God. Aquinas's point is that friendship with God cannot begin with us reaching out to God; rather, we can live in friendship with God only because God has first loved us and called us into the friendship of the divine life. Every friendship begins when one person takes the initiative to reach out to another and to welcome them into their life. Friendship with God begins when God offers to us in charity the very communion of love that is God. It comes to life with the outpouring of God's own happiness into our hearts, a divine happiness that is the divine friendship, the divine friendship that is the divine life.

For Aquinas, charity incorporates us into the Trinitarian life of God so that we can participate *as God's friends* in the love and goodness and happiness that is God, incompletely in this life, perfectly in the next life. What charity reveals about God is that God (as any friend would) wants our good, and our highest possible good is to dwell as fully as possible in the Trinitarian community of friendship that is God. Thus, to live a life of charity, as Aquinas understands it, certainly involves more than being thoughtful, nice, or congenial toward others. Although those things are obviously important, and to lack them would be contrary to charity, to think of charity only in those terms trivializes it. For Aquinas, what is most engrossing about charity, particularly when it is understood to define one's life as friendship with God, is that it incorporates us into the very life of God so that we can participate in, and be transformed by, the love and goodness of God.

Moreover, friendship with God is marked with the same qualities that characterize friendships among persons: mutual benevolence and a sharing of life around common goods and purposes. A friend is someone who wants another's good, is committed to bringing it about, and delights when it happens. The very offer of friendship testifies that God is committed to our good; however, a true friend of God is someone who seeks God's good as well through a heartfelt commitment to forward God's plans and purposes in the world. In a life of friendship with God, we return to God the love, affection, and goodwill that God has shown us by seeking God's will and living faithfully according to the ways of God. And we do this, the letter of James suggests, in our care for the neglected members of society (1:27; 2:14-17), when we extend mercy rather than judgment (2:13), and when we are "peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (3:17). For James, as well as Aquinas, authentic friendship with God is demonstrated by our willingness to embody and practice the ways of God in our everyday lives.

Thus, true friendship with God always unfolds in love for others. It is not a purely private and exclusively spiritual relationship with God that comfortingly insulates us from the needs of others, as if loving God would justify our becoming oblivious to others and indifferent to their well-being. Quite the contrary, friendship with God is never between God and ourselves alone, because the more we grow in friendship with God, the more we are

called to befriend others. A life of friendship with God links us to every man and woman who, like us, is loved by God and called to communion with God; as Aquinas insists, charity makes neighbors of us all. It calls us out of ourselves in love and service to others. It challenges us to become more attuned to the needs of our neighbors and to habitually consider how we might respond to them. It summons us to continually expand the circle of love to include all of our neighbors, even our most persistent enemies. “If Thomas is right,” William Young observes, “then friendship with God is not a private relationship, but rather a love that opens onto a life of virtue, justice, and concern for the world; only *through* this motion into the world does beatitude become possible.”⁴ Or, as James proclaims, if we see that “a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food” (2:15) but do nothing to help them, can we honestly claim to be a friend of God?

A DISTINCTIVE AND CHALLENGING WAY OF LIFE

Both James and Aquinas argue that friendship with God, if it is more than vacuous piety, has to be visibly displayed. It must be seen not as an escape from the world and the responsibilities we have for others, but as a distinctive and challenging way of life—indeed, a new kind of existence—identified through particular habits and practices. What would such a life look like? What would it involve? Aquinas answers this by identifying six “effects” or characteristics of a life of charity-friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction. Considering them can enrich our sense of what friendship with God entails.

It is interesting that the first effect of charity that Aquinas identifies is joy. A community of the friends of God may know adversity and hardship—indeed, it is why James insists on the need for patient endurance (5:10-11)—but nonetheless should always be characterized by joy because God, who is the fullness of our

joy, has befriended us in Christ and the Spirit. For Aquinas, joy comes not from external prosperity, even the absence of suffering, but by being one with what we love. A community of the friends of God should always be marked by joy because they live in and from the love of God, a love that no amount of adversity can destroy (Romans 8:35-39). This is why gloom and desolation should never mark the Church. The joy that comes from friend-

If friendship with God is more than vacuous piety, it must be visibly displayed. Thomas Aquinas identifies six characteristics of a life of friendship with God: joy, peace, kindness, mercy, almsgiving, and fraternal correction.

ship with God frees us from the fear, anxiety, and listlessness that stifle the works of love, and imbues us with the energy and resilience we need to love well in all the circumstances of our lives.

Peace (or, concord) marks a community of the friends of God because instead of being divided by their differences, they are one in their collective love for God. Aquinas taught that peace is the result of a “union between

We know peace not when we agree with others about everything, but when we agree about the true and the good, about what is worthwhile. Christian congregations should exude peace because none of their members loves or desires anything more than God.

one’s own desires and those of another person.”⁵ We know peace not when we agree with others about everything, but when we agree with them about the true and the good, about what is most worthwhile and deserving of our devotion. As a community of the friends of God, Christian congregations should exude peace because none of their members loves or desires anything more than they love and desire God. By contrast, discord, the antithesis

of peace, seeps into our families, our communities, and our churches when we can no longer agree on what is most deserving of our love – when we share no common good – and when we allow differences about secondary matters to divide us. Too, peace is lost when bitterness, jealousy, gossip, envy, and resentment get the best of us. These are the very things that James says mark those who choose to be friends of the world rather than of God. Christians are not strangers to these toxic forces; however, friends of God refuse to allow them to become permanent features of their lives. They counter the energies of discord and estrangement with gentleness, humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation, all vital aspects of a life of friendship with God.

Kindness is the practice of charity-friendship with God by which the friend of God regularly looks for ways to do good for others, whoever they may be. Aquinas notes that doing good for others is one of the principal activities of any friendship. We want to do good for our friends because of the love and affection we have for them. Similarly, kindness is one of the central practices of a life of friendship with God because such a life calls us to see *all* of our neighbors *as friends*, and thus to love them and do what we can to help them. Friends of God are to have goodwill toward every person (even their enemies) and, if the opportunity arises, to express that goodwill through visible acts of kindness. As Aquinas elaborated, “even though a man

is not actually doing good to someone, charity requires him to be prepared to do so if the occasion arises, and whoever the person in need may be."⁶ How different our lives together would be if we took that advice to heart!

Many members of the human community are suffering and afflicted and in pain. This is why mercy (or, compassion) is an indispensable practice of friendship with God. The friends of God do not ignore, shun, or turn away from those who are suffering, but befriend them and do what they can to help them. With mercy, the suffering of another speaks to us and touches us; their affliction draws us out of ourselves to do what we can to alleviate their pain. But the crucial point is that our hearts are sorrowful at the sight of others' sufferings precisely because a life of friendship with God enables us to see them not as strangers but as *another self* to us, as fellow friends of God on our collective journey to God. Indeed, compassion compels us to recognize, honor, and be attentive to the broken and wounded ones around us because thanks to God's befriending love, they are part of us as we are part of them. In fact, for Aquinas, mercy is so integral to how our love for God is meant to unfold in love for those who are hurt, wounded, and broken, that he names it the act by which we most resemble God.

Almsgiving is the practice of charity-friendship with God that calls us to respond to the bodily needs of others, particularly the most destitute and vulnerable members of society. Aquinas connects almsgiving with the traditional corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving hospitality to strangers, visiting the sick, ransoming prisoners, and burying the dead. Like James (2:15-16), he clearly could not fathom how one could live in friendship with God if he or she ignored the bodily needs of their neighbors. Through the corporal works of mercy, the friends of God minister God's love, care, and compassion to others.

Lastly, when James says that Christians should "confess your sins to one another" (5:16) and confront anyone in the community who "wanders from the truth" (5:19), he is describing the practice of fraternal correction, another essential element for sustaining a community of the friends of God. It is always easier to talk about people rather than to them; but if we really do want another's good we must be willing to bring to their attention attitudes and behavior that are not only detrimental to their relationship with God, but also to the life of the community. Healthy community life is only possible when people care enough about one another and their lives together to address behavior that is inimical to the community's well-being. It is rare to find the practice of fraternal correction in congregations today, but it should be an abiding practice of communities of the friends of God because without it we cannot fulfill Jesus' command to love our neighbor. Fraternal correction reminds us that sometimes love must take the form of challenge, confrontation, and correction. This is done not to deride or diminish a person, but to remind them of who they are called to be as a beloved friend of God.

CONCLUSION

So James is right. We can choose to be friends of the world or friends of God. Each choice will take us down different paths, form us in very different ways, and lead us to quite distinctive destinations. It is easier to be a friend of the world – and this is an abiding temptation for congregations – because such a friendship asks nothing of us. Friendship with God, however, asks everything of us. It demands that we love God more than we love anything else and that we pledge to live according to the ways of God that have been revealed to us in Christ. For James, that is the mission of the Church. The Church is called to be a living sacrament of friendship with God. Wherever this happens, in congregations large or small, the Church becomes a compelling sign of hope and a credible witness of a richer, more promising, and truly human way of life. It is exactly what the friends of the world have a right to expect from the friends of God and, perhaps, even long to see in them.

NOTES

1 For a more detailed explanation of friendship's role in our moral and spiritual development, see Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 46-69, and *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 67-76.

2 For a fuller account of Augustine's understanding of friendship and community, see Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 185-217.

3 Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London, UK: T & T Clark International, 2004), 111.

4 William W. Young, III, *The Politics of Praise: Naming God and Friendship in Aquinas and Derrida* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 100.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 2a2ae, q. 29, a. 3.

6 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae, q. 31, a. 2, reply 1.



PAUL J. WADELL

is Professor of Religious Studies at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin.