

# **The Soil of Friendship**

July 16, 2023

## **Rocky Soil**

One of the “soft skills” that they drilled into us when I was in seminary was setting good boundaries. The idea was that all of the people we serve have good and compelling and interesting lives, and if someone in ministry is going to be able to do right by an entire congregation (and even beyond), a healthy degree of boundaries is necessary. So, for instance, maintaining professional boundaries in ministry looks like not inviting the homeless people one encounters to camp out on one’s couch, not making personal loans to congregants to help them get back on their feet, and so on.

This whole idea seemed a little convoluted to me at twenty-three years old, and then I accepted a contract to coordinate the young adult ministries for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. My first project was to reproduce a program that had a cult-like following in Chicago, called Theology On Tap. If you’re not familiar with the concept, the idea was to host a speaker and discussion series for four weeks in a row, targeted at 20 and 30 somethings. The sessions were to be held off church grounds, usually in a pub, in order to appeal to folk who, for whatever reason, weren’t active in a church.

The first season that I ran this in Milwaukee, we had seventeen sites, each hosting four nights. For those of you who aren’t quick at math, that meant lining up 68 topics and speakers. Numbers wise, it was a huge success. Sure, some sites only drew a dozen or so participants, but some drew over 150. Over the course of one month, we had thousands (thousands!) of 20 and 30 somethings participate in this church event, and this in the middle of the summer.

In the midst of this whirlwind, I felt like a rock star. I was at a different venue every night of the week, I was the go-to person, the hub. The accolades were flying in. And so were the propositions. And in that, I figured out the value of the boundaries that my seminary had stressed. Very quickly, it became apparent that I had to convey to the participants that I was working, and that my purpose was to help them forge relationships with each other, not with me. By the end of the first week, I developed a strict “no dating” rule, and by the second week, I’d extended that to friendships.

As I look at our Gospel passage today, the parable of seed being sown in all different kinds of soil and try to apply it to Christian friendship, the example of me deflecting advances during my stint as a rock star minister would be an example of the seed that fell on the path. In the Gospel, Jesus says that the seeds that fall on the path quickly become birdseed, gobbled up before they even have a chance to sprout. You may not have had the experience of being a rock star minister, but many of us have had the experience of flash-in-the-pan relationships. These are the people you meet at a backyard barbeque or at a conference for work, even though you hit it off, there’s just no soil in which the seed of Christian friendship will take root.

## **Friendship**

Allow me to back up for a moment. Earlier this week, I had the joy of being able to hear one of my mentors and favorite theologians, Paul Wadell. Paul was my ethics professor in seminary and remains a huge inspiration. His life’s work is the idea that at the center of the Christian life is

friendship. The title of his first book summarizes his thought: "Friendship and the Moral Life." His thesis is, "You should never attempt to live a Christian life without friends."

Christian friendship isn't about the friends. It's about how they help us on the way to God, and we experience God's love with and through them." Think of the people in your life who have helped you to be your deepest, most compassionate, most authentic self. Those friendships, Wadell would suggest, form the core of a Christian moral life. His definition of a friend is someone who wants what's best for you, and he goes on that friendship is a school of love, a sanctifying way of life.

Now, lest we get all syrupy here, Wadell is quick to note that friendship is not always easy. The more we know the other, the more opportunities there are for us to hurt and disappoint one another. Quite frankly, friends see us when we're not always at our best. To seek the best for the other means being real, not just telling them what they want to hear. What makes a relationship a Christian friendship is that it draws the image of God in you more fully alive.

Isn't that gorgeous? I hope that you have that. I pray that you have relationships that draw the image of God in you more fully alive. And if you don't have that in this season of your personal life, I hope this church can be your friend.

As we look to our Gospel and this notion of Christian friendship, our hope is for relationships that grow deep roots, relationships that can stand the test of time. In applying Jesus' parable of the soil to friendship, one might think of the political polarization of our society today as the thorns that choke out the fruit of our relationships, but Wadell's work takes us deeper than that. He looks to the twelfth century monk, Aelred of Rievaulx, who wrote extensively about healthy relationships, and in turn, unhealthy ones.

Rievaulx names two kinds of "friendships" as counterfeit. The first he calls carnal friendships. Carnal doesn't mean what it implies in today's day and age, that friendships in which physicality comes into play are counterfeit. Rather, to Rievaulx, carnal friendships are those which prey on the other's weaknesses. The ultimate effect is to make the other less, diminished.

I think of relationships I've had in the past in which our conversations regularly devolved into gossip or in which I've regularly felt anxious. Sometimes these relationships are, as Rievaulx' language suggests, carnal. These are the drinking buddies who say, "C'mon, what's one more going to hurt?" Or the shopping buddies who encourage you to shop 'till you drop.

Good friendships should always make us better because they appeal to what makes us better. So, one question to ask of our friendships: does it help us both to appeal to our best selves?

The second type of relationship Rievaulx calls out is what he calls worldly friendships. These are self-serving relationships in which the goal is furthering oneself. What comes most quickly to mind are political and business relationships. In these relationships, even if they're symbiotic, the other is merely a stepping stone. These are the social climbers, in today's language, "influencers."

The converse of these worldly relationships are friends with whom we can be truly open. People who will help us tend the gardens of our souls.

Along with Rievaulx' counterfeit friendships that feed on our weakness or serve as stepping stones, Wadell is also critical of relationships that narrow ourselves, our view. Here, he reminds us that CHRISTIAN friendship models itself on Christ, and therefore Christian morality opens our worldview, doesn't narrow it. (Hear THAT, Supreme Court?) Following Christ, and therefore Christian friendship, liberates and expands, doesn't fetter and contract.

### **Conclusion**

In looking back at my need to hold strong boundaries while coordinating young adult ministry for the Archdiocese of MKE, the experience wasn't all for naught. Even though I quickly developed a strict professionalism, there was one person who wormed her way in. It was on the last night of the last session. I was packing up my bag with all of the sign-in sheets and directional posters when a woman walked up to me, reached out her hand, and said, "I'm new to Milwaukee, will you be my friend?"

Folks, to this day, I have no idea why I said yes to her when I had said no to literally dozens of others that week, but twenty-five years later, she's one of my best friends. You who are regulars here at Union know that my spirituality isn't heavy handed. I don't usually subscribe to the notion of God putting things in our paths. And yet I do count Sarah as a gift from God.

We've had our ups and downs, have disappointed each other plenty over the course of twenty-five years. But regularly and consistently, she helps me to be more kind. She opens my worldview. And perhaps most importantly, she calls out what is best in me.

And I'm not being prideful when I say that I'm honored to do the same in her. Wadell says that we need friends to remind us what way we're called to go. The best kind of friends keeps us moving toward what really matters. We all need someone with whom we can be truly open, someone with whom we can relax our hearts, people with whom we can reveal, stop pretending, people who give us the opportunity to speak our soul and who won't betray it.

Jesus spoke of seed being strewn on all sorts of different kinds of soil. My prayer this week is that in each of your lives, some seeds of friendship will find good, fertile soil and that those friendships will develop good roots and bear fruit.

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**Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9**  
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