
On Friendship in Jesus Christ

Craig L. Nesson

*William D. Steng Professor for the Education and Renewal of the Church
Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics
Wartburg Theological Seminary*

“**H**ow faithful you are if you have a friend with whom you may talk as freely as with yourself, to whom you neither fear to confess any fault nor blush at revealing any spiritual progress, to whom you may entrust all the secrets of your heart and confide all your plans.”¹

In classical texts that describe the character of friendship, chiefly in Plato and Aristotle, the primary notion involves “preferential love.”² Friendship emerges from the discovery of pleasing characteristics in another person. When this discovery is reciprocated by the other, friendship evolves. Reflecting on the view of Aristotle, Meilaender comments:

The highest form of friendship arises at the intersection of the two classifications: when those who are equal choose one another as friends, not merely for the sake of pleasure or advantage, but because of the other’s character.³

This first quality of friendship is therefore “preferential and particular.”

A secondary quality of friendship, deriving from the first, acknowledges friendship as “a reciprocal or mutual love.”⁴ This adds a transactional dimension to friendship. When the accustomed character of the friend no longer expresses itself as before and the bond of reciprocity is severed, friendship fades.

Friendship is not love in general; rather, it is a deep attachment to and preference for another person because of the sort of person he or she is. Yet, because this is the case, it seems necessary to say that if one of the persons changes, the relationship must change and friendship may die. If friendship is preferential love, it must cease when the characteristics that gave rise to such preference are no longer present.⁵

1. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press: 2010), 72–73, 73–74.

2. See Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (London/Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), Chapter One.

3. For this quote and the following phrase, see Meilaender, 13.

4. See Meilaender, *Friendship*, Chapter Two.

5. Meilaender, *Friendship*, 53.

This article ... contrasts these three forms of friendship expressed in the classics of the ancient world to three dimensions of friendship originating from Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

A third quality derived from classical sources is “civic friendship.”⁶ This involves a bond of friendship based on citizenship, those who unite around the common cause of preserving the state. Meilaender observes that given the “history of the Greek city-state...we ought not be too sanguine about the possibilities of civic friendship.”⁷ The fragility of civic friendship has become even more evident under recent US political circumstances.⁸

This article, dedicated to Dr. Norma Cook Everist,⁹ contrasts these three forms of friendship expressed in the classics of the ancient world to three dimensions of friendship originating from Jesus Christ in the New Testament.¹⁰ These three dimensions are: 1) friendship and the dance of the Triune God, 2) Jesus names us friends, and 3) friendship and the sacrament of foot washing.

6. See Meilaender, *Friendship*, Chapter Four.

7. Meilaender, *Friendship*, 70.

8. Beginning with her doctoral dissertation, the theme of civil religion has had a prominent place in the scholarly work of Norma Cook Everist. See Norma Cook Everist, *The Paradox of Pluralism: A Sociological, Ethical and Ecclesiological Perspective of the Church’s Vocation in the Public World* Ph.D. Thesis (Denver: Iliff School of Theology and The University of Denver, 1988).

9. For a brief biography, see “Lutheran Diaconal Service: 100 Years of Service—Deaconess Norma Cook Everist,” <https://thelda.org/100-years-of-service-deaconess-norma-cook-everist/> Accessed 1 January 2022.

10. In its own way, this is also the purpose of Meilaender.

Friendship and the dance of the Triune God

*“Pure friendship is an image of the original and perfect friendship that belongs to the Trinity and is the very essence of God.”*¹¹

—Simone Weil

The origin of all friendship springs from the divine friendship among the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Augustine employed the analogy of love to interpret the oneness of the divine persons of the Triune God in a community of love. God the Creator is the source of all love, who endlessly gives of this love to God the Son with the Holy Spirit as love itself that binds the persons of the Trinity into a unity of love. Or, as Augustine expresses the mutuality of these relationships with reference to divine friendship: “...for there is no true friendship save between those thou dost bind together and who cleave to thee by that love which is ‘shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us.’”¹²

In Eastern Orthodox theology, *perichōrēsis* expresses “the idea that the three divine persons mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, ‘are’ what they are by relationship to one another.”¹³ The image of “divine dance” beautifully visualizes this “communion of love” among the three persons.¹⁴

...the dancers (and the observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. There are no leaders or followers in the divine dance, only an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.¹⁵

According to Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *perichōrēsis* is “the foundation of an ethics that upholds three central values: inclusiveness, community, and freedom. Since these ways of relating are the hallmarks of divine life, they should characterize the patterns of human persons in communion with one another.”¹⁶

Human friendship originates from our following the divine invitation to join in the dance. The persons of the Trinity create an open circle for our participating in the life-giving relationships among the Divine Persons and we discover ourselves dancing with one another as friends.

Perichōrēsis is thus the intradivine model for persons in the human community. *Perichōrēsis* takes place within God, and the human community is supposed to mirror or imitate this *perichōrēsis* in its own configuration.¹⁷

Human friendship originates from our following the divine invitation to join in the dance. The persons of the Trinity create an open circle for our participating in the life-giving relationships among the Divine Persons and we discover ourselves dancing with one another as friends.

Friendship arises from this invitation to join with Holy Trinity in the *perichōrētic* dance, entering in that dance oneself and alongside a company of friends.¹⁸

Here friendship has both a transcendent origin and an imminent expression, arriving upon us as a gift from God the Creator in the love of the Son by the power of the Spirit. We recognize friendship as a gift that occurs of divine begetting, for which one can only be grateful. One receives this gift by honoring the Giver as we join in dance with one’s partners as friends. Friendship is embodied as one learns to attend to the subtleties of motion flowing from the Spirit and responsive to the well-being of the friend.

In contrast to the classical understanding, friendship depends neither on qualities that attract nor on reciprocity. Instead, friendship in the Trinitarian dance involves the values of inclusiveness, community, and freedom. The divine economy fuels friendship with energy to welcome others generously, live together peaceably, and respect differences.

Furthermore, the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis* invites all people to participate in the dance. The body of Christ, with every member centered in baptismal identity and vocation, dances in the arenas of daily life—family, work, school, local community, citizenship—on behalf of the common good as each one shares distinctive gifts with others in friendship. Imagine the life of the church dancing to the Trinitarian rhythms together with neighbors and in service to others, starting with the least!¹⁹

11. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 208.

12. Albert C. Outler, ed. and trans., *Augustine: Confessions* 4.4.7 <https://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/hum100/augustinconf.pdf> 25 November 2021.

13. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 270-271.

14. Cf. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 271.

15. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 272.

16. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 272-273, citing Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

17. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 276.

18. See the practice of liturgical circle dancing at Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, San Francisco, California: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7_hLmim0Gs

19. Norma Cook Everist, together with her colleague, Nelvin Vos, has taught all the baptized that they are part of this dance through their ministries in daily life. See Norma Cook Everist (with Nelvin Vos), *Where in the World Are You: Connecting Faith and Daily Life* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1996) and *Open the Doors and See All the People: Stories of Congregational Identity and Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016). The curriculum by Norma Cook Everist and Nelvin Vos, *Connections: Faith and Life* (Chicago: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1997), also continues to serve the church in this effort: <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/>

Jesus names us friends

*“When Francis felt most alone in the world, most persecuted and misunderstood, it was Clare he would turn to for clarity, wisdom, and a love stripped of sentimentality.”*²⁰

—Mirabai Starr

Within the matrix of the Trinitarian dance, Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Our Lord extends an explicit invitation into his community of friendship:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 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. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another (John 15:12-17).

At the invitation of Jesus, we receive welcome to understand ourselves as his friends; for Jesus’ sake, we also live as friends with one another in bonds of love. No longer should we view ourselves as servants of God but rather as friends of God. This invitation initiates us into an intimacy not afforded to servants. God, who knows our every weakness, perfects divine power as grace in my weakness is transformed into strength (cf. 2 Cor 12:9-10).

Friendship with Jesus allows us to disclose our inmost selves to his care. Jesus receives me in my vulnerability and woundedness and embraces me “just as I am.” Friendship with Jesus is friendship with the Crucified One, who attends to my suffering.²¹ The love of God in Jesus Christ creates safe and trustworthy space for authenticity. The love we receive from Our Friend Jesus Christ becomes the foundation for mutually life-giving relationships with others.

In the friendship of Jesus, we may entrust our heartache and struggles to the friends we receive in his company. Within the Christian community, the bond of friendship with one another is mediated by the person of Jesus Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer testifies in *Life Together*, whenever we interact with other members of the body of Christ, these relationships transpire in and through Jesus Christ.²² When we relate to our friends, we do so in the

wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Connections-Resource.pdf

20. Mirabai Starr, *Saint Francis of Assisi: Brother of Creation* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2013), 74-76.

21. See Craig L. Nessan, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), 83ff.

22. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Work—Reader’s Edition, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), Chapter One.

Friendship with Jesus allows us to disclose our inmost selves to his care. Jesus receives me in my vulnerability and woundedness and embraces me “just as I am.” Friendship with Jesus is friendship with the Crucified One, who attends to my suffering.

presence of the Living Jesus Christ. When we look into the face of our friend, we see the face of Jesus Christ. When my friend gazes into my face, the face of Jesus Christ is mirrored back.

This allows us to extend the intimacy we share with Jesus Christ to the relationships we enjoy with the friends Jesus gives us. The friendship we share in Jesus Christ activates the kindness of God that I receive through my friend. Jesus Christ ministers to me through the listening and empathy of these friends. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” In friendship, we lay down our lives for one another through compassion and generosity of spirit. We lay down our lives in friendship day after day as we accompany one another on our life journeys.

Friendship in the Name of Jesus Christ bears fruit that enriches the lives of others.²³ We expand the circle of care ever wider as we learn to be different together. Wherever Christians are being formed into the image of Jesus Christ through ministry, Christian education is taking place. Christian education is a name we give to this process of mutual formation.²⁴ As we are formed into the community of Jesus Christ, we extend the evangelical promises to an ever-widening circle of friends, who are joined to the friendship of Jesus through our witness.²⁵

Friendship and the sacrament of foot washing

“For when followers of Jesus walk beside him, he leads them in directions they would rather not go, into neighborhoods they would rather avoid, and to meet other friends of his they might not normally know.”²⁶

23. Two fruits of deep friendship include Norma Cook Everist, ed., *Gentle Strength: Homilies and Hymns of Ralph F. Smith* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wartburg Theological Seminary, 1995) and Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nessan, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

24. See Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

25. See Norma Cook Everist, ed., *Christian Education as Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

26. Dana L. Robert, *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 12.

Together in the Trinitarian dance, we receive the friendship of Jesus and live as friends with one another, sharing the weight of existence and hope for future glory. The vocation of friendship calls us to humility in setting aside our own interests to attend lovingly to the needs of others.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you (John 13:12-15).

In the way of Jesus Christ and setting aside other priorities, we choose to embody love for our friends.

Jesus Christ washes the feet of his friends. This holy act bears all the marks of a sacrament: Jesus’ command (13:15), the material sign of water, and the spiritual gift of love. Life in friendship is the manifestation of this sacrament in action. I lay aside my status and agenda, bend down in loving devotion, and wash dirty, tired feet.

How would our church be transformed as Christian community, if foot washing were a core practice of our sacramental life? As one whose feet have been washed by my friends in Christ, I know we would be a more authentic and genuine witness to the heart of the Gospel. We would be a church devoted to the care of both aching bodies and wounded souls. Humbling ourselves in response to Jesus Christ having washed our feet in love, we would be sacraments of this love for the life of the world.

The world in which we live is fractured by division and discord. The world is crying out for healing, *tikkun olam*, the repair of creation. The world is polarized by rhetoric and conflict.²⁷ And the church also is in danger of being overwhelmed by these same forces of intolerance and scapegoating. Yet, for Christ’s sake and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the gates of hell do not prevail against it.²⁸ The ministry of Christ continues to unfold through the ordinary means of kindness and friendship in the company of Jesus.²⁹

Friendship is “not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7). Friendship becomes manifest in suffering love for the neighbor.

Friendship in the presence of Jesus Christ is a source of profound joy, too great for words. To dance with the Trinitarian

This holy act bears all the marks of a sacrament: Jesus’ command (13:15), the material sign of water, and the spiritual gift of love. Life in friendship is the manifestation of this sacrament in action. I lay aside my status and agenda, bend down in loving devotion, and wash dirty, tired feet.

Persons is to be enveloped by divine love. To be named friends of Jesus involves intimate communion as we bear one another’s burdens and share our sorrows. To participate in the sacrament of foot washing is to receive the ministrations of Jesus, take on his yoke, and wash the feet of others, making them friends. All of life becomes graced by our friendship in Christ Jesus.³⁰ “Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift” (2 Cor 9:15)!

27. See Norma Cook Everist, *Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

28. See Norma Cook Everist, ed., *The Difficult but Indispensable Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

29. See Norma Cook Everist, ed. *Ordinary Ministry, Extraordinary Challenge: Women and the Roles of Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).

30. Norma Cook Everist, *Seventy Images of Grace in the Epistles That Make All the Difference in Daily Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock, 2015).