

What would you do for a friend? Do you feel loved by your friends? If we were to look at the ancient 1st century meaning of friend we might not be able to call one another friend so easily. In Greek the literal translation of friend is “loved one.”¹ And “Friendship is defined by Jesus’s love. To be Jesus’s friend is to love Jesus and be loved by him.”² Jesus’s death was the ultimate expression of that sort of love. The love relationship like God’s love for Jesus and Jesus’s love for his disciples – and for us 21st century followers – is the model for friendship.

Throughout the 50 days after the resurrection, Jesus had been demonstrating to his friends – the disciples– that he was the risen Christ, that he had returned to prepare them to continue his work in the world. Jesus no longer called his disciples servants but rather friends because as a servant they might not know what he, their Master, was doing. But Jesus taught his disciples everything – everything – that God had taught him. The first weeks after Easter we too have learned what Christian love is. And now these last weeks in Easter season just as Jesus prepared his disciples – and he has been preparing us – for his leaving so that we can continue his work. Perhaps his disciples were insecure. Could it be that the disciples felt unprepared to carry on Jesus’s work? Do we feel prepared or insecure? Jesus prepared his disciples – and us – to bear fruit that will last. He commanded his disciples – and likewise we have been commanded – to love one another. And he called them – and us – friends. And “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

More than 35 years ago, a good friend came to my emotional rescue after the death of my father. His children were away for the weekend, and he had a choice: to attend to the needs of a high school friend or to do the much needed chores that had been piling up around his house and yard and catch up on some needed rest. I thank God that Jim chose to come to me, for that reunion of two old friends led to my marrying my best friend and my soul mate. Why did he choose to attend to a friend rather than paying proper attention

to the demands of his own life? I believe that it was because he had been listening – not to a 21st century Podcast or even a CD, but to an audiotope, an ordinary 20th century audiotope – a tape of an extraordinary recording of a seminar by Brennan Manning.

Brennan Manning was a mystic whose spirituality touched and still touches the very heart of those who encounter his wisdom. He was raised in NYC during the Great Depression and enlisted in the Marines after high school. After his return from the Korean War he went to seminary and was ordained to the priesthood as a Franciscan. He joined the contemplative order and for 6 months he lived the life of a hermit monk in a cave. Then he returned to the US and began to write, and write, and write. He left the priesthood and married and led spiritual retreats. The story that Jim listened to on his drive from New Orleans to Monroe – the story that prepared Jim to minister to his old friend – is retold in one of Brennan Mannings books. It really is Brennan Manning's story; he changed his name to Jack Robison in his book. I am sorry that I do not have his captivating Irish lilt that I first heard on the tape.

In the winter of 1952, during some of the heaviest combat of the Korean War, two Marine corporals were crouched in the bunker of a forward observation post some one hundred miles inside enemy lines. Jack Robison and Tim Casey had been best friends for almost a year. They met in ammunition-demolition school in Quantico, Virginia, went on furlough together, then traveled to Camp Pendleton, California, for advanced infantry training. Their regiment had arrived in Pusan in the fall of 1951.

It was a little after midnight, and a light snow was falling. Huddled in the bunker, the two were passing a cigarette back and forth when a hand grenade, lobbed by an undetected North Korean 25 yards north of their position, landed squarely between them. Casey spotted it first. He nonchalantly flicked the butt aside and fell on the grenade. It detonated instantly, but Casey's stomach absorbed the explosion. He winked at Robison and rolled over dead.

Four years later Robison entered religious life. When he pronounced his solemn vows in 1960, he took a new name to symbolize his new life in Christ Jesus. He changed his given name from Jack to Casey in the hope that the spirit of self-sacrifice that animated Tim Casey's life would characterize his own. He also befriended Casey's widowed mother and began to divide his Christmas vacations between his own family in Rhode Island and Mrs. Casey in Chicago.

One summer Father Casey Robison dropped in at Mrs. Casey's on a surprise visit. He was feeling tired and depressed. They followed the usual procedure of

watching the afternoon soap operas on television together, holding hands all the while. After dinner they sat in the living room having a drink and reminiscing about the days when Tim was alive. The priest's depression lingered. Unexpectedly he asked, "Ma, so you think Casey really loved me?"

She laughed. "Oh, Jack, ya sure got a way with ya." It was a faint Irish brogue. "Ya can't be serious."

"I am serious," Robison replied.

There was fear in her eyes. "Now stop funnin' me, Jack."

"I'm not funnin, Ma"

She looked at him in disbelief. Then fear turned to fury. Mrs. Casey never cussed or took the Lord's name casually. But this night she stood up and screamed, "Jesus Christ, man, what more could he ha' done fer ya?"

Then she sank back in the chair, buried her head in her bosom, and began to sob. Over and over again the same phrase was endlessly, unbearably repeated: "What more could he ha' done fer ya'?"

After a long time, she smiled her wan little smile and said softly, "Ah, Jack, I guess we all need those reassurances from time to time."

That was the night Father Casey Robison gave up his insecurity and found the peace that comes with genuine trust.¹

My friends – and I mean friends in the New Testament 1st century Biblical sense of the word, for there is nothing that I would not do for you all – my friends, we all need reassurance from time to time. But be assured that, like Jesus's first disciples, we have been chosen. Jesus said: "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." We are to bear fruit, to do the hard work of love. And why were we chosen, my friends? Jesus told us why: "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." We, individually and as a community, are commissioned to do works of love. Even when I am unlovable, even we all individually and as a community are very unlovable, even when this world of ours is so very very unlovable, we are asked – no we are commanded – to abide in Jesus's love – to remain in Jesus' love.

And to further equip us to bear good fruit, to do the work of loving one another and the world, whatever we ask in Jesus's name, God will give us. Now that comes with the caution to be careful what we ask for, because God will give it to us. Could it be that Father Casey's friend asked God for the love of a friend? And he loved his friend so well

that he was willing to give his life for him. As his adopted mother asked: “What more could he ha’ done fer ya’?”

There is nothing that God would not do for us. Nothing. He loved us so much that he gave his only son, our Lord, Jesus Christ to teach us how to love a friend. And Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to give his life to save his friends. What more could he have done for us? All that Jesus did was so that we would love one another. So we are to love as we have been loved, my friends.

Lord may it be so. Amen.

¹ *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, p. 1939.

² *Ibid.*

³ See *The Importance of Being Foolish* (pp. 62-64, 2005). Here are Brennan Manning other books –I heartily recommend them all.

- *A Glimpse of Jesus: Stranger to Self Hatred*
- *Above All*
- *Abba's Child*
- *All is Grace*
- *Boy Who Cried Abba: A Parable of Trust and Acceptance*
- *Furious Longing of God*
- *Journey of the Prodigal*
- *Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus*
- *Patched together – A story of my story*
- *Posers, Fakers and Wannabes*
- *Prophets and Lovers: In Search of the Holy Spirit*
- *Rabbi's Heartbeat*
- *Ragamuffin Gospel*
- *Ruthless Trust: The Way of the Ragamuffin*
- *Reflections for Ragamuffins: A Daily Devotional*
- *Signature of Jesus*
- *Smack Dab in the Middle of God’s Love*
- *Souvenirs of Solitude: Finding Rest in Abba’s Embrace*
- *When we Cry Abba*
- *Wisdom of Tenderness*