

The Bread of Friendship

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When people speak of friendship, they can mean many things. A friend can be someone who agrees with me, or likes my post on social media. A friend can be someone who provides access to status and influence, through the people they associate with.

Then there's the friend who stays by my side when all those other friends have left me high and dry: The friend who tells me what I don't want to hear, but need to understand; The friend who awakens me to that which is best in me, and what's best in both of us.

Immediately we can see a basic distinction among the relationships we call 'friendship': Is this relationship simply a means to an end, a way to gratify some wants? Or does it offer a path towards living more fully, and more deeply? This question cuts across the gamut of human relationships.

Each one of us is unique. Our loves arise in response to specific needs: our needs for comfort, for intimacy, for safety, for belonging. An imperative to reach out to others, to be connected and not to live apart, can take many forms.

The ancient Greeks spoke of several kinds of love. There is *Eros*, arising from sexual desire and the longing for physical union. There is *Storge*, grounded in the ties of family and the joys of belonging. And there's *Philia*, which grows out of sharing an experience of common values and interests. *Philia* is what many of us call friendship, in the conventional sense – it's companionship with appreciation. When we share experiences together, our enjoyment is multiplied.

These categories of relationship – *Storge*, *Eros*, and *Philia* – are not mutually exclusive. A given relationship may include all of them. That's how a spouse can be a family member and a lover and a friend – all of which many of us count on.

These forms of love can share a certain quality in common. In fact, they should. The Greek word *Agápē* has been used to describe the selflessness of love: the love that seeks the well-being of another, with the intention of bringing it about. Some writers have described *Agápē* as the "highest" form of love – as if companionship or kinship or physical love were somehow lower. But I would not treat *Agápē* as a separate category.

Whatever the need our love answers to, we have a choice. If we treat the relationship as a means to an end, it can be limiting and diminishing. Where it leads toward wholeness and growth, we are choosing the way of *Agápē*: the way of kindness, of caring, of Caritas.

This is the love which the apostle Paul describes in the famous passage of 1st Corinthians, chapter 13:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Such love does not tear down; it builds up and strengthens the people involved, and taps into life's abundance. Again from Paul,

Love is patient; love is kind; love 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.

Agápē moves us from the utilitarian, limited kind of friendship to the limitless, transformative kind. Where *Agápē* is present, it draws out the best in us. As we begin to want what's best for the other person, we form the intentions, the habits, and the capabilities to bring this good about. We become better people as we reach beyond our own needs and wants.

Agápē adds this transforming, *limit-less* quality to human relationships. Without it, there's only so much love to go around. You can have 50, 100, 1,000 friends on Facebook. But eventually I've got to wonder how deep these friendships are – when you get past that thousand mark, the *Philia* must be spread pretty thin. Not so with *Agápē*. However much you share, there's still more to go around.

This brings me to the subject of food...

There's a recipe called "Friendship Bread" which has been attributed to the Amish people. Although the recipe could come from anywhere, it's true that the Amish share bread, and sourdough starter, among their neighbors and friends, especially the sick and the needy.

Today's Friendship Bread is a cake-like bread with flavorings of cinnamon and vanilla. I've found a recipe and provided you a link to it, alongside the order of service – so you can make some sourdough bread, and starter to share, if you like.

My experience with Friendship Bread occurred back in the 1980s, when I was working for Digital Equipment Corporation. I don't even remember who gave it to me – a fellow engineer, a receptionist, someone I ran into once in a while. The bread and the starter came with a typed-up recipe telling me how to mix some dough, add in the starter, and let the dough rise ...

I'd never made bread from scratch before, but it seemed easy enough, so I tried it, and the results were pretty good. I also followed the directions to set aside some starter, mix it with more flour, and wait a while, in order to make more starter. I gave this to maybe a dozen people, with copies of the typed-up recipe.

Back in the 1980s, when I was a shy, not-very-gregarious engineer, this Friendship Bread gave me a reason to speak to more people than I usually did, and in a different way. People I'd barely made eye-contact with, before. People whom I'd dealt with in a purely instrumental way: to ask a technical question, to get some supplies, to make an appointment ... It turned out that many of these people were friendly, and all of them liked food. So they responded positively when I turned the conversation around to bread, and I said to them: I've got this sort of *chain recipe* going. Would you like to try it?

It's not hard to see Friendship Bread as a symbol for *Agápē* or better yet, a concrete example of *Agápē* at work:

First, there's the *transformative* quality I've mentioned: Friendship Bread, as a recipe, nourishes bodies. Friendship Bread, as a process, transforms strangers into acquaintances, and acquaintances into friends. People who were bit-players in our lives before, people who were merely instrumental to getting our needs met, become three-dimensional human beings with their own minds, their own aspirations, and their own hearts.

It's one thing to say "I love mankind", that I want what's best for humanity. That's a fine ideal, but it's only a wish, until we meet with some actual human beings and engage them in a positive way.

That's one reason we have churches. We're not just here to give voice to our aspirations, and to invoke the sacred through our words and our songs. We're here to embody the sacred in our dealings with each other, and the larger community. Especially in the Free Church tradition that we share, this is what it means to be a church.

Second, there's the *limitless* quality of *Agápē* I've mentioned:

It's *Limitless* – because it's not confined to the walls people have built to define their identities and roles. At Digital Equipment Corporation, the Friendship Bread found its way across cubicles, between floors and buildings, even up and down the org chart. I'll never know all the people who eventually received the Friendship Bread, and which of them made more sourdough starter, and who gave it away.

Since Digital was a friendly place back then, and not the stereotyped Faceless Corporation, perhaps my experience isn't too surprising. But it does suggest how Love can move; how Love can find its way through the institutions and barriers of even the most oppressive regime. In his own time and place, Jesus embodied this movement of Love across all barriers. This moment has repercussions even now: every authentic human contact becomes a conduit for more *Agápē*.

It's *Limitless* – because it doesn't run out. You divide it up, and it remains undivided. You share it out, and there's still more to share. We may say that Love is infinite and we may be right. But on a practical level, we can say it's beyond our counting, even beyond our ken. With Friendship Bread, you give out a few batches of sourdough starter to friends or people you meet. Each one of them gives out a few batches of starter. Pretty soon, you can't keep track of who got the Friendship Bread, even if you wanted to.

It's *Limitless* – because *Agápē* seems to move under its own power. Actually, it needs a little help from people. In the case of Friendship Bread, each person spends a little money, gives a little time, makes the effort to share the starter with a few others. But given that modest input, Friendship Bread takes on a life of its own. So it is with Love: it begins with us, but it doesn't end with us.

Actually, that's not quite right: Love doesn't end with us, and it doesn't begin with us either. We can love because someone loved us first. With Friendship Bread, we can comprehend the process: for us, it began when we received a bit of starter, and the instructions for making it and sharing it.

But *Agápē*, we can know only in part. We don't know all the ways we've been loved, and all the ways we've been changed, and all the ways our love has touched the lives of others. We can only choose to accept that love, and to share it out undivided.

So may it be.