

Sermon: **Besties**, Rev. Kelley O'Connor

I was thinking this week that we throw the word love around easily. I love hamburgers. I love my Mom. I love everyone. We use love in many ways and often in very general ways, not always sincerely. But one word we don't throw around, that has maybe become more about love than anything else, is the word friend. When we say someone is our friend we are saying something big about someone special.

One day when I was in the seventh grade a new girl walked into my English class. She was tall – like 5'10 or so. She sat down across the room and was quiet during class. When the bell rang we walked out of the room at the same time. I asked her what her next class was and she said orchestra. That was where I was headed too so I told her I'd show her the way. We both had to stop at our lockers and grab our violins before heading across campus to the band room. That was the first day of the best and longest friendship of my life. Anne is a Spanish teacher in Denver, Colorado. We haven't seen each other since our last high school reunion in 2004, but it doesn't matter. We can pick up a conversation right where we last left it. Our loving friendship was and is forever.

When I was younger I had a friend named Beverly – we became blood sisters by poking our fingers with a needle and pressing them together so that our blood mingled and we swore we would always be best friends.

Why do some people come like magnets into our lives? What is it about friendship? What makes it happen? Are we brought together? Is it happenstance? Is it something that forms in the stars, or is sent from heaven? Does God ordain our friendships?

In this age of HIV I don't think blood pacts are encouraged but still there is something about a deep abiding friendship that makes people want to ensure it's foreverness. And I know what friendship feels like. I know what it means to me. I know it is worth claiming and holding on to, worth nurturing, sustaining, maintaining.

It seems incredible to me that Jesus calls us his friends. But I love the idea of hanging with him, chatting with him, going for coffee or out for a meal with him. I love the idea of sitting in the family room with him eating popcorn and watching a movie. The whole thing seems like such a great deal.

In 1955 a book was published called, “The Blood Covenant” by M. Clay Trumbull, who had tracked blood kinship all over the world.

One of the stories in his book is about the blood covenant between two young men of Arab descent. This is how it went:

First the young men met at an open place in front of the village fountain, where they were surrounded by the relatives and neighbors they had invited to witness their covenant. Then they declared their purpose to the crowd – to become each other’s closest kin – and they spelled out what that would mean for each of them while a scribe copied down what they said, not once but twice so that they would each have a record of the promises they had made. After that was done both men signed both copies of the covenant along with several of their witnesses, and together they moved to the center of the crowd.

Then one friend took a sharp lancet and opened a vein in the other’s arm, inserted a hollow quill into the wound and drank the living blood of his friend. When he was through he wiped the lancet on one set of the covenant papers and stood still while his friend repeated the whole procedure on him. Then both men declared in unison, ”We are brothers in a covenant made before God: who deceiveth the other, him God will deceive.

Then both of the bloodstained covenant papers were folded into one-inch squares and sewn into matching leather amulets that the young men would wear around their necks for the rest of their lives. They had forged a bond between themselves that was more sacred than any other bond in their lives, including marriage and parentage. From that day forth neither of the two young men lived for himself alone. Each was possessor of a double life, having taken his friend’s life and nature into himself.

Belief in the power of shared blood must come from some place way down deep inside of us because it shows up over and over again in stories that have shaped our sensibilities. In the romances of King Arthur, for instance, there is a story about a maiden daughter of King Pellinore – Percival’s sister – who accompanied her brother and sir Galahad to a distant castle in search of the Holy Grail.

When they drew near the place, a band of knights from the castle accosted them and told them the custom in that land. Every maiden that passed through it had to yield a dish full of her blood. Percival and Galahad would hear nothing of it and slew a bunch of the knights in defense of the fair maiden. It

was not until they made their way to the castle that they learned the rest of the story.

Inside the castle a noble lady lay sick unto death, and the only way she could be saved was to be anointed with the blood of a pure maiden who was also a king's daughter. Hearing this, Percival's sister agreed at once to give her blood, but alas she gave so much that it killed her. "I die, brother," she said, wilting in front of him, "for the healing of this lady."

In all of these stories, blood is the vehicle of transferred life. Like rising sap or like a bubbling spring, it contains the very essence of life and because it does, it is a direct link to the divine source of all life. When Cain kills Abel, his brother's blood cries out to God from the ground on which it is spilled.

When Noah comes stumbling down the gangplank of the ark, the first thing he does is make a blood offering in thanksgiving to God. Abraham, too, sacrifices five animals as part of his covenant with God.

Moses throws blood on the altar and on the people when he gives them the book of the law. God is very clear that blood is precious stuff – not just human blood but animal blood as well – because the blood of a creature is its life, and that makes it sacred to the author of all life. "Then what about the lives of all those poor animals?" All I can tell you is what I have been told: that in the ancient world, blood had everlasting life in it, life that outlived its temporary host, and it was the sharing of the blood that mattered – the offering of it – whether it was your own blood or the substitute blood of the most perfect animal you could find. The death of the creature was not important. It was a means to an end, and the end glorified the means. In its death the creature made life possible for another – much as Percival's sister did – and its death was swallowed up in life.

This is very hard stuff for us post-moderns. There are not many of us who do butchering anymore, much less sacrificial butchering, and the shedding of blood is something we work hard to stop.

When we hear the story of Abraham and Isaac and we want to yell, "Stop! Take that boy back down the mountain, old man! What in the world do you think you're doing?" The only reason we repeat the story at all is because it turned out all right in the end – that is it turned out the way we wanted it to, because we cannot fathom Abraham's willingness to go as far as he did with his son.

But in his world, it was the covenant with God that mattered. If he broke that, his son's life would be worth nothing to him. By offering God his only son, he offered the one thing he had to give that was more precious to him than himself. Killing Isaac was not the point; sharing Isaac's life blood was, and while we thank God it did not come to that, what do we think we are doing when we come to the Lord's supper?

"Take, eat, this is my body," Jesus said. Then he took the cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Have we done it so often that we have forgotten to be shocked by it? Of course it is not real blood in the cup. It is probably Welch's grape juice, but clearly, this is a blood covenant we are being asked to enter into, with staggering implications.

While we tend to keep children from it until they "understand" what they are doing, most of them understand it better than we do. Try offering a child her first communion. Hold the cup down where she can reach it. Watch her peer inside sniffing the sweet juice. Her hands come up to take the cup.

"The blood of Christ," you say, thinking how well this is going, how touching it all is. "Yuck!" she says, jerking away like she has been stung. "I don't want any of that!"

Would any of us, if it were the real thing? And yet it was a real thing that happened on that hill outside of Jerusalem, something utterly beyond our comprehension involving the gift of life's blood that bound us to God in a whole new way. No one stuck a hollow quill in anyone else's vein. No vows were recorded, no amulets made. There was nothing written down anywhere except over his head: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." But when it was all over, the world was a different place, and the world knew it. The earth shook. Rocks split. Tombs groaned and fell open to the light.

A new covenant was in effect – one that Jeremiah had talked of years before without knowing how it would come to pass. Now it had, and no one could have predicted it, that God would become flesh and blood in order to bring divine love to life, that God should become it and then give it up, so there could be no further doubt about God's faithfulness to the covenant.

It was a covenant in which God agreed to do everything. There would be no more waiting around for humankind to wise up and obey, no more temper

tantrums when they did not, no more elaborate systems of punishment and reward.

All God had ever wanted to do was to save their stubborn hides so that God could love them, but with the new covenant all of that was over. “Here,” God said with the gift of a son – the one thing God had to give that was more precious to him than himself. “You don’t have to come to me where I am anymore. I will come to you where you are, through this beloved child.

And the child was willing. He was not forced to do what he did. He chose it – not easily, not without almost dying of sorrow first, but he chose it. No one forced his hand when he broke that bread. No one made him raise that cup. “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

It is important, I think, that Judas was there that night. Knowing what Judas would do, Jesus did not bar him from the table. He set a place for him, he ordered food for him, he ate out of the same dish with him. Judas was included until he excluded himself, which gives this new covenant some real bite. When Jesus holds up the cup and offers what is in it as the fluid of forgiveness, he is not talking to people with a short list of minor sins. He is talking to people who will turn him in, who will scatter to the four winds at the first sign of trouble, and who will swear they never knew him. He was talking to people who should have been his best friends on earth, who will turn out not to have a loyal bone in their bodies, and he is forgiving them ahead of time, as surely as if he had said, “I know who you are. I know you will not be innocent of the blood in this cup, but I will not let that come between us. Look here, I bless it. I make it my gift to you. Let it mean life to you, not death. Let my life become your life, through the blood of this covenant.”

“I die, brother, for the healing of this lady.”

“I die, father, for the healing of this people.”

The death cannot be overlooked, nor should it be, but it is the life that is being offered, the life that rushes out of that cup like a spring of living water. It is God’s promise from before time and forever, spelled out this time in flesh and blood. It is the new covenant and the last one – new because it’s offered to us fresh each day and last because there is nothing more that God can say or do.

This is as close as God can get: blood kin, indissoluble union, friend bound to friend for life, forever. When we lift the cup to our lips and drink, we accept

the gift, renewing the covenant and reminding ourselves that we do not live for ourselves alone. We are possessors of a double life, having taken our friend's life and nature into ourselves. Inside of us God rides our bloodstreams straight to our hearts where the covenant is written: I shall be your God and you shall be my people.

As the people of God we share in the covenant with each other. We are blood kin. In that relationship is deep love and great joy. Our relationship with each other goes much deeper than our opinions of one another's habits or appearance or performance. Our love for one another is a life bond that cannot be broken – only opened up and shared. As God loved him, so he loves us and we must love one another. He said these things so that his joy would be in us and our joy would be complete. I pray that what you find here at (Christ Church) (St. John's) is always deep love and great joy in your relationship with God and in your relationship with one another. How blessed we are to be so loved and cared for and doubly blessed because we know it. Let's spread the Good News so everyone can go through life knowing they're part of the beloved family. Amen.

And Happy Mother's Day!

Credit: Rev. Kelley O'Connor, Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor