

## **THE ART OF FRIENDSHIP AND COMMUNITY**

The spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, is quoted as saying, "Friendship and Community are, first and foremost, inner qualities". Many of us mistakenly search outside ourselves for answers to life's challenges. We feel small inside and not very secure or powerful as to respond to those challenges. Many of us have tried to change our lives by letting others tell us what to do and how to do it. We often find our identities controlled by outside influences. To some extent that comes without our permission - like the devastation and ruin that has occurred these past several weeks with Hurricanes, Floods and Fires throughout the country and beyond. Peoples lives have been affected forever by these natural occurrences. But their will to survive and go on is the driving force that keeps their identities intact. Humility is a gift that comes in many different packages. It matters not our status in life - we can be humbled in a minute.

Yes. friendship and community can be the winning combination that helps all people to find their true identities and to become more expressive of that identity in our society and our church. But humility is the image that is required in order to really understand the gospel challenge. Knowing your

limitations and not seeking the prominent positions in life can be very humbling. They are also part of our spiritual growth. Community surrounds us and supports us if we allow them to. But ultimately it is our sense of belonging that creates our identity and gives us meaning for the long haul.

Luke's gospel considers the demands that discipleship asks of us. To take risks, to give up everything and to be prepared for the ultimate risk, our very lives. You see, the greatest revelation of God's love and power is present within the human person. But how often do we really believe it? He is revealed in our strengths and weaknesses. He is revealed in our high moments as well as our lowest times when we think nothing can ever go wrong - but indeed, the low moments and devastating times can also reveal His presence. In the first part of the gospel gives us the stark reality of what must be done in order to follow Jesus: The Cross / Don't look back / Be free of possessions, the rewards of humility are stressed, to the point that humility seems to mean nothing more than hanging back before you make your own move. Yet the second part of the gospel is even more substantial. It advocates a humility that consists of actually associating with the humble: The poor / the

confused / the sick and lame, the crippled and diseased, the alienated and the blind. How difficult that is. It takes discipline to give up one's security to invite the stranger in our lives. It takes a great amount of faith to get us through the muddle of our lives and to focus on the least favorable place in life. But that is exactly what the gospel asks us to do. For me, there are too many assumptions that are too readily accepted by us each and every day. These assumptions keep us from really hearing the truth about ourselves. For instance, how many of us give in to the thinking that in order to really experience full happiness we need to be on a certain rung of success. Not that long ago, some teenagers from my parish visited St Francis Farm in the Appalachia Hills of New York State. Their eyes were opened as to some of the realities in the world. One of our high school seniors wrote to us expressing how his life has taken a new turn for him. He now sees how success can come in different packages and that people all over the world have the power to be successful when they see that the goal to success is not in materialism but in becoming the least important.

Many of us feel threatened and fearful about standing up for what is morally and ethically right

these days. Too often we chose to say nothing - to stand on the sidelines and let others dictate what is morally or ethically correct. Whether we're speaking about family issues / white collar crimes / substance abuse / the economy / respect for the seniors in our lives / respect for the quality of life before birth and after birth. Whether we're speaking about discrimination in all its forms, we need to hear the truth and be able to have confidence to know that our voice can make a difference.

In the midst of brokenness and grief the Cross is essential. Whether it be our own brokenness or someone else's, the Cross is the sign of stability in the Christian's journey. Keeping a close proximity to the Cross truly keeps us alive and nourished and gives us a sense of identity. The key is that we must take ownership of that identity and not skirt around it. Sometimes is a matter of timing but more often it is a matter of being prepared to take the risk and let the God who loves you be the foundation for who you are and where your life is going. It is a daily decision that all of us must make. Don't wait to the end to evaluate whether you can or cannot separate from that which is holding you bound. Look for your place at the table - it may not be at the head or even

close to the head of the table. But the Lord knows where you are and makes His presence known to you. Sometimes his presence is obvious - other times it is not. To be sure to find him - seek out the least among you and the least favorable place in the kingdom. That is where the Lord is - that is where the Cross is - that is where spiritual growth and total happiness is.

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