

Some time this past week I ended my sixth year as the pastoral minister for Cincinnati Friends Meeting and began my seventh. Seven is a number with special significance in the bible—especially in the Hebrew scriptures— and there is something about the biblical number of seven that reminds me what a substantial part of my life the meeting has become. Especially when I think of the kids who've been born in this meeting on my watch. There are about a dozen of those kids, (and this doesn't include grandkids, which would add about a dozen again) from Luke Miller and Lily Barney to Ashley Hirschbach and Noah Wheelock, and then there are the ones who are on their way, like the Helton twins, and the next Kinsinger baby.

When we sit in worship, I always think I have the best seat in the Meeting. You guys have to sit out there and wrestle with God while you look at me fidget. My friend on the facing bench has a chance to watch for hummingbirds and deer out the north windows. But through these south windows I get a clear view of our kids when they come running out of the Fireside room and into the yard, I get to see the way they grow from being carried in arms to standing watching the bigger kids until they finally are the bigger kids, playing tag or swinging or chasing after a ball.

I'm not talking about how they're cute kids, precocious kids, endearing kids, though they may be all those things. What they are is our kids: the children who belong to this people who is us, just like we belong to them, this building belongs to them. I was reminded of this a couple of nights ago listening to two sisters who grew up in this meeting, women in their mid-thirties now, remember what it was like here when they were children. What they remembered was how difficult it used to be, in the Fireside Room, to jump from a square of brown tiles over a square of white tiles to another square of brown tiles. What they remembered was how big a deal it was when they

got to move from the orange chairs in the nursery to the blue chairs in the little kids room, and then finally to the green chairs in the bigger kids room.

Those dozen kids who've been born into our community while I've been here, and the two dozen others, both children and teenagers, who are with us every week or maybe once a month, no matter how well or little I know them, those kids remind me of what it means to belong to a community. They remind me of the value of friendship.

Let me back up a little to say a few words about what I'm talking about when I speak of friendship. One of the best explanations I've ever come across about why friendships are so important to our lives is the description offered by David Matzko McCarthy in his recent book, *The Good Life*. McCarthy writes about his son Jack, who started out in half-day pre-school when he was three, but then decided he'd rather stay at home all day. But he wasn't happy at home. He wanted his older brother and sister, who went off to school every day, to stay at home, also. McCarthy wrote: (read from p. 34)

When Jack's companions go off to school this wonderful [imaginative] world is lost to him. He cannot sustain it alone. Because it is so rich and lively, it is not a world that can be sustained alone by anyone. When his brother and sister are gone, Jack waits impatiently for their return. When they do return, he will wind up fighting and arguing with them. Good friends do not always agree. He will have to work hard to negotiate his role and the nature of the world they will inhabit...It will not be easy, but it will be their world. When his brother and sister return from school he will finally have, in his words, "something to do."

This "shared world" and "something to do" are at the heart of friendship. In a very serious way, friends help each other to see the world and to act in it. Good friends share a vision of what is real and true, and they share a course of action and a journey toward what is true and good.¹

What I am sure of, about those kids I get to watch out the window, and talk to every so often, and notice how they grow, what I'm sure of is that they make my life livelier and richer. Getting to know who they are, in their being and hearts—getting to know who their parents, are, as well, is the “something to do” that I am fortunate enough to spend time at every day.

When McCarthy describes friendship, I begin to see what a deeply spiritual act friendship really is. McCarthy talks about the richness and liveliness that come from being in the same place together, sharing time and space, sharing a vision and work. And that richness and liveliness, and the depth which they bring to our experience: it seems to me that these things are at the very core of the blessing of creation—that they are some part of why God made the world.

Friendship also allows me to experience the Otherness of the world—the fact that not everything is me, or is how I would want it to be—friendship allows me to experience the Otherness of the world in a way which isn't threatening or scary. And the Otherness that I face in friendship is an Otherness which helps me know who I am. Without the Other, I wouldn't have a person to be. Friendship helps me figure out who the person I have to be is.

And friendship offers me the best opportunity I have to give and receive Love, relatively easily. When someone is my friend, it is less hard than at any other time to desire that good things happen to them, to pray for good in their lives, to do what I can to help good happen for them.

As members of the Religious Society of Friends, we've taken our name from a verse in the 15th chapter of John where Jesus tells his disciples, in his parting lesson to them, “you are my friends if you do what I command you.” And only two sentences earlier, he has said, “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.” Because of this love for each other which is at very center of our identity as Friends, it makes sense that what we are about, here, is friendship.

When I say that we are about friendship, I mean friendship in two ways. The largest part, I think, is a general kind of friendship of one another. That's what we give to each one among us when we are willing to risk saying who we really are, and we are willing to receive from others who they really are; in other words, when we bring both the good and the bad of us to meeting, and accept the good and the bad in others. And we offer a general friendship when we are willing to share both the joy and the sorrow of the others who meet with us here.

The less frequent but no less important part of the friendship that we are about here is the quite specific individual friendships that might be formed. We may find people here whose lives and activities we come to know and care greatly about, whose lives begin to intersect and intermingle with our own.

It isn't necessarily self-evident that we should develop those deep and specific friendships here, rather than elsewhere—and I don't mean to suggest that they should be here, rather than elsewhere. In fact, those friendships seem so valuable to me that I think we do well to create them wherever we have the chance to do so.

But it also seems likely to me that, if we work at becoming a people who are willing to receive others with all their flaws visible and intact, then we are likely to begin to build deep and specific friendships within the larger body. Because, one way or another, we have the jump start of common experience. The deep concern and experience that we share is the act of worship, our presence with each other in the holy silence. We are people who are willing to spend half an hour to 45 minutes quietly in each other's company, and in God's company. And while the silence isn't the same experience for all of us, the fact that it's valuable to most of us, it seems to me, provides some fertile ground for deep and specific friendship to grow in.

And from that thought, I come back to thinking about our kids again, the ones I see from my bench and the ones I don't see. Because it may be that

we discover, when we become bound deeply to one another in friendship, that our friendship is not only an inward movement, a movement inside ourselves and towards one another in this small community. We may discover that our friendship requires a movement outward as well, that it pulls us actively into the world. Because of those kids, who are our friends and the children of our friends. I think, again, particularly about the dozen kids who've been born in my time here, and the others who are now here also under the age of six.

And I think about the world they were born into, a world where war doesn't happen on a battlefield or come from a bunker, which were the terrors when I was their age, but in which war happens in office buildings and airplanes and railroad cars and buses, streets and alleys, anyplace in the world, not just in Viet Nam or from Russia. That's the world they have—a world where every place they go is potentially a battlefield not yet declared. That's the world those kids who play outside this window have to grow up in.

So it makes me kind of wonder whether, because of our children, we are going to have to learn to spread our friendship more broadly. Whether we are going to have learn peace better, and whether we are going to have to be better witnesses for the power of peacefulness.

I know that the center of Cincinnati Friends Meeting has been, in the six years I've been here, and for many, many years, before, our communion with God in worship. The ability to come to meeting and feel God's presence has served to sustain us through our days and weeks. And that communion has moved us, usually as individuals, to different kinds of love for the world. But maybe in my seventh year, maybe we are coming to a time when we feel moved, together, to make not only an inward, but also an outward, commitment to peace. Because of our dozen and two dozen kids, who belong not only to their parents, but to all of us.

¹David Matzko McCarthy, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), 2004.