

## A Society of Friends

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The great Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, wrote about the two legs of our life journey, but he insisted they were not equal in terms of years. The first leg might be very short, ending when we are a young adult or it might last for decades, ending when we have “one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.” Dr. Jung documents through his counseling career that in the first leg we devote our time, energy, and relationships to developing our ego, sexuality, being successful, accumulating either stuff or property or liquid wealth, and what we erroneously call the “pursuit of happiness.” The years fly by and we realize that we are getting what we wanted so much, but the accumulation of stuff and the elusive goal of success and the passion of intimacy have not been sufficient. Something is still lacking. **Then we ask “is that all there is?”**

We make adjustments, sometimes radical adjustments. like walking out of our marriage, or changing churches, or taking on a radically new lifestyle. Studies show that tattoos have meaning. They are witness to milestones, relationships, or desire to “make a statement” are major reasons people get tattoos. **However, the most challenging life-enhancing change for the second leg of our life journey is to sense the presence of God, to have a deep inner peace that is not reflective of circumstances.** We can face reality with some mysterious sense of faith, hope, and love.

Jesus talked about the truth that would make us free. He said to come to him when we “labor and are heavily burdened” and find rest, tranquility, the security of eternity. **He warned us about stuffing our portfolio with the things of this world and losing our investment in our soul.** When St. John was a very old man, he wrote us a word of warning: “Everything that is in the world—the craving for whatever the body feels, the craving for whatever the eyes see, and the arrogant pride in one’s possession are passing away. But the presence of God abides forever.”

Is our faith keeping up with the changes of life? In school, if we don’t get promoted, we have to repeat the same grade twice. We will be embarrassed and people will be critical of us, even label us with insulting words. Why is it that we want to progress through the ranks of reading, writing, and arithmetic, **but are willing to remain for years and years and years stuck at the same level of our Christian faith?** Life happens and we are faced with new mysteries, new burdens, and new opportunities and new relationships. All of these call for us to have a growing faith in God. How sad if we still have a kindergarten concept of who God is and what God’s character is like and why God really matters in what is going on in our life right now. Even people who go to church and concentrate on the church’s committees and boards and projects may not grow in grace or deepen their faith.

**There is an element in religion that we have too often neglected. It is illustrated with two words-- “search” and “stretch.”** Jesus said, *“Seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you.”* He said on one occasion, *“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”* The term “not far” is like the term “almost.” At that point in any effort, we need a stretch! Now let’s be honest; **being a Christian is not in finding all the answers to the riddles of life, but in enjoying the journey. A part of this enjoyment is to develop some relationships, to have some fellow pilgrims.** Who lifts you up rather than letting you down? Who cheers you rather than depressing you? Who brings out the best in you rather than the worst?!

Do we have someone in our life who encourages us, brightens our day, cheers us up, assures us that “the jig is not up”? Ask yourself this question. In your conversations most of the time—are you positive or negative? Are you building up or tearing down? Are we complimenting or criticizing? Are we encouraging or discouraging? I have never understood people who gripe and complain and whine and moan and criticize all the time; then say they want to go to heaven. What would some of us do in heaven if God does not allow griping and complaining and whining and criticizing!

Socrates, 400 years before Christ, told what he expected in life after death, and made a list of persons whom he hopes to see. St. Paul wrote that we shall “know even as also we are known.” The games we play here will be over. With God whatever is, is. So in heaven we will know each other as only God knows us here.

A lot of mysteries and riddles won’t be revealed until we get to heaven, but God is calling each of us to search and to stretch. Back in the spring every snake left an old skin somewhere because it needed a new skin to fit its growing body. **If you agree with me that the secret of life is to grow in our exploration into God, what strides have you made this year** that is different about our mutual spiritual life? With what have you made peace this year—

- something you cannot change?
- something that is not going to get better?
- something that may even be getting worse?

By the same token, who has a better life because of your influence? To whom are you a blessing? Whose life are you lighting up? Who smiles when you come into the room? Are you counting your blessings?

Our community might not be what God wants us to be but think of the attributes we lift up here. In church we talk about love and hope and redemption, reconciliation and friendship.

One of the authors whose many books I have read across the years is a Quaker named Elton Trueblood. Some call him as well as C. S. Lewis the brightest Christian minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. Trueblood regrets that people outside the Quaker culture never use the correct term. The correct term is not “Quakers.” That was tacked on to them by their critics. **The correct term is “Society of Friends.”** Their churches are called “Friends meetinghouses.” What a

wonderful term for a faith family, a congregation of sinners saved by grace. Can we aspire to become a society of friends who meet in His house?

Gloria Gaither wrote a song, *Something Beautiful*, that is not exactly a hymn but could be, because it is the gospel truth:

*Something beautiful, something good  
All my confusion He understood  
All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife  
But he made something beautiful of my life*

*If there ever were dreams  
That were lofty and noble  
They were my dreams at the start  
And hope for life's best were the hopes  
That I harbor down deep in my heart  
But my dreams turned to ashes  
And my castles all crumbled, my fortune turned to loss  
So I wrapped it all in the rags of life  
And laid it at the cross*

If we can experience a renewed faith, all our doubts won't go away, all our temptations of doing what comes naturally won't go away, but something more profound happens. **We can grow in grace. With aging we can mellow rather than rot.** We can make peace with our circumstances, we can make peace with the people in our life who bother us, we can make peace with anything in the church that disappoints us, and we can find a friend in Jesus.

**Let's try hard this week to practice some old words. You remember them:**

*What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.  
Do thy friends despise forsake thee? Is there trouble anywhere?  
Precious Savior, still my refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.  
In his arms he'll take and shield thee, thou will find a solace there."*

We sing another hymn whose words we are challenged to live out if we are to be the church that is a society of friends:

*"Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love,  
Our fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.  
We share each other's woes, each other's burdens bear,  
and for each other flows the sympathizing tear."*

**Would it not be wonderful if every community were truly a society of friends?** Would it not be wonderful if our concept of heaven were like that of Socrates—the time and place when we can fully know, appreciate, and understand each other? All our life is fundamentally a preparation for eternity.

Let's bear each other's burdens and share each other's woes." **Let's learn from each other. Each of us has traits and gifts that others do not have. Can we enrich our lives mutually by saying, "Come walk with me."** Is not that what it really means to be a society of friends? **We are fellow seekers, fellow sojourners, fellow travelers, fellow pilgrims.**

As you wake up in your soul, something extraordinarily freeing and inspiring and invigorating will happen. Religion will no longer be 'same ol, same ol' but something thrilling that makes you see the same life agenda with new glasses. You will understand what Jesus meant when he said, "If you have eyes, see! If you have ears, hear!" As St. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth,

"Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor have you yet imagined  
what God has in store for those who love Him." **1 Corinthians 2:9**

Today let some of your old stuff go, your grudges too. **Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."** Let God set you free from the burdens of your first journey and freedom to embrace your new future.