



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - January 22, 2017 Sermon

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## Not Our House But God's Friendship

Romans 15:7-13, John 15:12-17

God is Friendship.—Saint Aelred of Riveaulx  
Friends share all things in common.—Ancient Proverb

*That* was a great act of faith. The Bible, in the Letter to the Hebrews, speaks of the great heroes of faith and *their* great acts of faith:

Through faith, they shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, and escaped the edge of the sword. Through faith, they received their dead by resurrection. Through faith, they were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Through faith, they suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. Through faith, they were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented.

And *through faith*, on January 22, in the year of our Lord, 2017, Westminster Presbyterian Church of Dayton Ohio welcomed the University of Michigan Men's Glee Club to sing in their Sunday morning worship. Through faith.

Of course, I don't mean to equate the two: welcoming the Michigan Glee Club is by far the greater act—I mean in comparison to that, all all that stuff in the Bible . . . well, it just pales in comparison.

You think, I'm kidding—that I'm making another one of my predictable and perhaps by-now-a-little-cheesy Michigan jokes, but I'm not. OK, maybe I was kidding about our act of faith today being greater than all those recounted in the Bible. But I'm not kidding about it being an act of faith. It was an act of faith, because it was an act of friendship—an act of friendship that depended on, and witnessed to, God's friendship for us and our world.

"NOT IN MY HOUSE"—so the 6' 10" power forward shouts as he wags his finger back and forth, immediately after swatting the visiting player's shot into the 15th row.

"WHOSE HOUSE? OUR HOUSE!" So the Duke students, wearing their blue body paint, never sitting down, but bouncing up and down through the whole game—the Cameron Crazies they call them,—shout and chant, "WHOSE HOUSE? OUR HOUSE!" immediately after their 6' 10" power forward has swatted the visiting player's shot into the 15th row.

In case you haven't noticed, this trope of our court, or our arena, or our field, or our stadium being referred to as "our house"—in which no visiting team will ever be welcomed much less victorious—it has proliferated to the point where it's now used in a series of television commercials for a sports apparel company. (In case you haven't noticed, sports apparel companies like to cash in on the popularity of college sports.)

And yet today, January 22, 2017, Westminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton Ohio welcomed the University of Michigan Men's Glee Club into our house. And some of you even put them up in *your* houses overnight!—although I did hear tell that one of you left all his Ohio State banners up in the guest room. And we just let them get out here alive *and* well.

Now what is going on here? I'll tell you what: games are just that: games. But God is God; and God is friendship.

God is friendship. I know, I know: we're used to hearing "God is love" (it's in the Bible First John 4:8). But I think—and I'm not the first or only one—that "God is friendship" may get closer to what the Bible actually means when it says "God is love."

Too often we moderns think of friendship as nothing more than decaffeinated romantic love. But in the ancient world it was friendship—not romantic love—that was the highest human love.

C.S. Lewis said that friendship characteristically begins with: "What, you too? I thought I was the only one." And so, with time (and often not much time at all), a friend becomes (as the ancients put it) a second self, another me. Another ancient proverb: Friendship makes the two (or more) of us into one.

Yet we don't lose our individual identities in the unity of friendship; instead, we gain them. In describing his extraordinarily close and extraordinarily gifted circle of friends (they called themselves "The Inklings"), C.S. Lewis wrote: "In perfect friendship . . . each member of the circle, especially when the whole group is together, brings out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others."

That's friendship: a perfect union of two (or more) in which each becomes perfectly, uniquely him or herself in the unity. We don't lose our individual identities in the unity of friendship; instead, we gain them (see, you were right to leave those Ohio State banners hanging in the guest room). And of course, the perfection of perfect friendship is found in the trinity of God: a perfect union of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in which each person is perfectly uniquely Father Son and Holy Spirit. God is friendship.

But friendship is more than that. Again, the ancient proverbs: friends share each other's joys and sorrows, a friend doubles my joys and halves my sorrows; friends share all things in common. Friends share a world. A friend always wants what is good for his friend, and more than anything else, wants what is good for his friend simply for his friend's own sake, and will do whatever it takes, including laying down his life, to realize that good.

And so Jesus Christ comes to us as friend: to share our humanity, to take on both our joys and sorrows, to share our world, to do what is good for us and the world even to the point of laying down his life for us and the world. "I do not call you servants any longer, but I call you friends. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

God is friendship.

"Get real, Richard." I've been at this long enough to know that's what I'm going to hear at this point, at least from some people, including some church people. "Get real, Richard, all this friendship stuff is nice, but that's not the way the real world works—in the real world, it's dog-eat-dog, swim-with-the-sharks, eat-or-be-eaten, survival of the fittest."

That last—"survival of the fittest"—is of course a phrase associated with Darwin's theory of evolution. But if you're expecting me to denounce that theory as an abomination before the Lord, as has sometimes been done from the pulpit, well . . . no. Darwin's theory *is* a theory, but that does NOT mean it's a guess, a hunch, or mere speculation. In science, a theory is a body of laws, principles, and theorems that have explanatory and predictive power over a certain domain of phenomena precisely because they have emerged from a whole lot of disciplined and focused observation, as well as testing and experimentation. And as theories go, evolution is a good one: it does a magnificent job of explaining the origin

of the species, which is, after all, what Darwin called his book. And of course, like any good theory, it's open to ongoing testing, modification, and development, correction and refutation. That's what makes it a theory, makes it interesting, makes it scientific. But Darwin's theory explains the origin of the species; it doesn't explain everything, nor was it ever intended to. In our popular culture, however, it's frequently used to "explain" everything from fashion fads to online dating services to office politics to all our political, economic and social behavior—used to "explain" those things minus of course the disciplined and focused observation, not to mention the testing and experimentation.

Now, of course, there is competition, conflict, and struggle in human life, just as there is in the natural world. And of course just as natural selection (survival of the fittest) serves a higher purpose (the development of species) within evolution, so competition in the human realm when kept within proper bounds, can have positive effects, can serve higher purposes: athletic achievement, intellectual and artistic insight, technological innovation, the general achievement of excellence, the improvement of human health and well-being, the betterment of humankind, the care of the world.

I read David McCullough's book when it came out a few years back: the Wright brothers weren't motivated exclusively, or even primarily, by a desire to be first: there was the intrinsic joy of discovery and invention, the sheer beauty of movement and flight, the deep desire to benefit humankind—but they still wanted to be first. And they were first—in Dayton Ohio. And I hereby denounce every claim to the contrary as an abomination before the Lord.

A few more examples: Our justice system, to the extent that it is adversarial, is premised on the belief that justice and truth are best served through competition and conflict kept within their proper bounds. Our political system—with its separation of powers, and checks and balances—is similarly based on the belief that the general welfare is best furthered through competition, conflict, and even struggle, kept within their proper bounds.

The problem is keeping them within their proper bounds. Witness the 28,000 law enforcement officers at the inauguration on Friday. Or for that matter, witness the frequent abuses and scandals that beset college athletic programs, or academic programs, or for that matter, the financial markets, the business world, our justice system, and our political system.

And when we see how often we transgress those bounds, it raises a big question: which lies at the heart of our political life: friendship or strife?

Jonah Goldberg, editor of *The National Review*, made a nice point in an op-ed piece this week:

We can all say—over and over again until the cows come home—that we want to unify a divided nation, but until we stop using the language of war in our politics, and until we stop seeing the White House as the "biggest prize and totem" to be "taken back" in what amounts to no-holds-barred, if-you-can-get-away-with-it-do-it campaign of total warfare—until we stop all that, we're not going to overcome our divisions.

WHOSE HOUSE?—When the house in question is the White House, the answer is our house, where "our" means not a particular political party or an particular political ideology, or even a particular kind of people, but the American people. But that can hold true only if some measure of friendship—civic friendship—mutual good will in our shared public endeavor—and not strife defines us.

And by the way, please don't think I'm finding fault with only the most recent political campaign or the present occupant of the White House with his avowed give-no-quarter-take-no-prisoners practice of paying back every perceived affront in spades. No, this push-the-boundaries, political-campaign-as-

total-war goes back at least to the 1992 presidential campaign in which the team for the Democratic candidate referred to their conference room as the “WAR ROOM” where they debated how to respond to, and how to launch, “oppo research” (opposition research) so as to do the greatest possible dirt to their opponents. And of course it goes back farther than that on both sides; it’s always been there. The difference is that now the toxicity has reached the level where it begins to threaten our body politic—and one symptom of that threat is physical violence, which for humans is always preceded by verbal violence. As ye sow so shall ye reap.

We need a much greater measure of friendship—civic friendship—to repair our common life together. But can we achieve it? Is it even possible? Which raises the biggest question of all: what lies at the heart of our universe: friendship or strife?

Friendship or strife? —which is it, ultimately, really? It’s probably more a philosophical question than a scientific one, in fact it was first raised by the philosopher/natural scientist Empedocles over 2500 years ago. But it certainly relates to science: I would say that the overall intelligibility of our universe—an intelligibility that all scientists and all scientific theories (including Darwin and the theory of evolution) both presume and seek to express—I would say that argues for the overall unity, the friendship, if you will, of all things. And maybe that’s a good answer, or at least the beginning of one. But more than that, it’s an existential question: one that we can answer only with how we live our lives, and the truth of our answers can only be known and felt as we live our lives in one way or another.

In other words, we need to step out in faith: taste and see that the Lord is good, and that God is friendship.

WHOSE HOUSE?—When the house in question is the church, the answer is God’s house. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.

God is friendship.

On January 22, 2017 Westminster Presbyterian Church in Dayton Ohio welcomed the University of Michigan Men’s Glee Club into God’s house. It was a great act of faith.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.