

May 5, Easter 6

(1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17)

The Christian faith often gives friendship short shrift.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

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On the first day of the first seminar of my doctor of ministry program, Holy Presence: Eugene Peterson and the Pastoral Imagination, I felt ill at ease during morning prayer. I was thrilled to be there. But having spent the entirety of my life in relatively progressive mainline Christian communities, I had never before had the experience of being the sole woman in an ecclesiastical space. The only other woman in the program, a faculty mentor from Australia, hadn't been able to make the pilgrimage on account of ongoing COVID restrictions. So there I was, surrounded by male classmates—a symptom, I suspect, of my anecdotal observation that Peterson's work just doesn't seem to resonate as deeply with my clergy sisters.

To begin our time, the faculty adviser delivered a lecture that set the tone for the three years to follow. I'd have to refer back to my notes to recollect most of what Winn Collier said in that opening address, but a few points burned into my permanent consciousness. He speculated that most of us weren't really motivated by a doctoral degree and affirmed that the academic trappings were merely justification for the true purpose of our convocation: soul work. This checked out for me; I'd totally surprised myself by reversing a previous decision not to pursue a DMin. Winn went on to name one of his central hopes for the cohort: that we would find "providential friendships." I side-eyed my classmates as I wondered which, if any, of these gentlemen would become my friends, providential or otherwise.

On the final day of the final seminar of the program, I wept through our closing circle as Winn reflected on our new vocation as "doctors of the church," a reframing of the degree that felt redemptive and healing. I was not the only one in need of tissues. The experiences we shared on this journey were profound. Alongside these men—and Mandy, who finally made it from Brisbane—I immersed myself in books

like Peterson's *The Contemplative Pastor*, sang and prayed and laughed by Flathead Lake in Montana, and grieved the death of my father on the Isle of Iona. We also completed and defended dissertations and absorbed the wisdom of one another's research. But when Winn asked us what gifts we would carry with us from the program, I piped up first: friends.

Perhaps friendship seems like a meager takeaway from a DMin program. I refinanced the mortgage on our house to pay for the tuition and travel; there are significantly cheaper pathways to finding friends. Furthermore, shouldn't my big takeaway be more substantial than bonding with brothers in Christ?

Then again, Jesus commands his disciples to love one another as he has loved them, and he calls them his friends. This is remarkable. Perhaps especially because he says this in the Gospel of John, the most theologically dense and spiritually ethereal of the accounts of Jesus' life. To me, such a pronouncement would feel more on-brand coming from Luke's more relational perspective. Instead the radical reordering of the human and divine relationship is stitched into Jesus' final discourse, delivered while the disciples are still digesting their Lord's last meal.

The Christian faith often gives friendship short shrift. Certainly there are those who have leaned into companionship with Christ and kingdom compatriots. C. S. Lewis was a great defender of the importance of friendship, and he backed up his lovely words about *philia* in *The Four Loves* by keeping a robust network of friends. How many nerdy young Christians have longed for their own iteration of the Inklings?

But the larger focus—especially within American Christianity—has been family. Many congregations like to refer to themselves as families, despite the fact that it's generally harder to join a family than to slip into a circle of friends. As often as not, friendship is a secondary consideration. Yet Jesus says there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Smack dab in the middle of my doctoral studies, ChatGPT was unleashed on the world. Although AI is already so embedded into daily technology I can't manage to avoid it completely, I am a bit of a conscientious objector. I've used it very sparingly, and only to generate proof of its inherent creepiness. Last summer I asked it to write a pastoral letter about friendship. The creepy quotient was off the charts; the friendless bot waxed prosaically about the significance of spiritual friendship. The bot can't abide in the love of Jesus, who, according to 1 John, came by water and

blood. The bot can't lay down its life—it doesn't have one. The bot is not human; no water, no blood.

Yet the bot is, according to some enthusiasts, our future. Gross. There is nothing more dissimilar to artificial intelligence than a congregation. A company of providential friends, abiding in the love of Jesus together. The doctorate was worth every prayer and penny.