

“Christian Friendship”

Psalm 103:1-13 and II Corinthians 3:1-6

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Dr. David W. Swink

Chilson Hills Church, Brighton, Michigan

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We are Jesus' recommendation letter!

I am asked at least once a month to write a letter of recommendation for someone. I take this task very seriously. I want what I write to be honest. I also want to write about the person in as positive a light as possible. Letters of recommendation are not new in this world. In the early Christian church they were used to identify the authentic traveling evangelists from the frauds. In the Roman period, Lucian the satirist wrote that any traveling charlatan could make a fortune out of the simple-minded Christians, because they were so easily imposed upon. (Wm. Barclay, *Corinthians*, p.186) Letters of recommendation were necessary then and they are important now. Christian friends recommend other Christian friends!

In this portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, Paul makes an incredible statement. He says to the church, "...You are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God..." (vs.3) Paul is saying that their church, and by implication, every church of Jesus Christ is a letter of recommendation to the world. People will know Jesus, the Risen Lord, because of how we live together. The world will be blessed, or cursed, by how the Body of Christ lives within it. The power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is most clearly demonstrated to the world through a congregation of men and women who are growing as friends with Jesus and friends with each other.

Of course, the natural question is to ask what kind of recommendation letter are we writing? How can we be friends with Christ and friends with each other? What does a fully alive, vital, and energetic Body of Christ look like in this first part of the Twenty-First Century?

Fortunately, we have a picture of just such a church. The New Testament is a movie documenting the work of the Holy Spirit writing letters of recommendation within the hearts of congregations of people all around the Roman world. We need only to look at our Sacred Scriptures to find God's vision for our church. God desires that Christian Friends live the "Triple A" life: adventurously, authentically, and under the authority of Jesus Christ.

Live Adventurously

During the first three centuries of the Christian church Christian friends lived day by day never knowing what the next day would bring! God sang a new song through them. They were alive with the passion of God's love for the world.

- In Rome, Christian churches challenged the practice of infanticide by collecting the castaway children and caring for them in their homes.
- In Athens, the Christian church challenged their academic idolatry by living out the reality of Christ's resurrection from the dead.
- In Corinth, the Christian church challenged the sexual religion of Athena that permeated everything in the city from top of their acropolis to the bottom of the fish market.

These early Christian churches were vibrantly alive. They believed God was calling them to make a difference in their world, and they did!

In our own United States of America there have been times when the Christian church caught fire and transformed the country. The abolition of slavery was a church inspired transformation. The establishment of education for every child was church inspired. The building of hospitals and colleges was church inspired. Even the establishment of the freedom of religion and speech in our national constitution was church inspired.

If we are to be a vital, living, energetic recommendation letter for Christ, then we will be adventurous. We will be doing new things, singing new songs, brewing new wine and putting it in new wineskins. We will be a congregation of people willing to brave the storms of year because we know that God is at work in the storm.

In the last half of the 19th century, John Muir was our most intrepid and worshipful explorer of the western extremities of our North American continent. For decades he tramped up and down through our God-created

wonders, from the California Sierras to the Alaskan glaciers, observing, reporting, praising, and experiencing--entering into whatever he found with childlike delight and mature reverence.

In 1874, Muir visited a friend who had a cabin, snug in a valley of one of the tributaries of the Yuba River in the Sierra Mountains--a place from which to venture into the wilderness and then return for a comforting cup of tea.

One December day a storm moved in from the Pacific--a fierce storm that bent the junipers, pines, and fir trees as if they were so many blades of grass. It was for just such times this cabin had been built: cozy protection from the harsh elements. We can easily imagine Muir and his host safe and secure in his tightly caulked cabin, a fire blazing against the cruel assault of the elements, wrapped in sheepskins, Muir meditatively rendering the wildness into elegant prose. But our imaginations, not trained to cope with Muir, betray us. For Muir, instead of retreating to the coziness of the cabin, pulling the door tight, and throwing another stick of wood on the fire, strode *out* of the cabin into the storm, climbed a high ridge, picked a giant Douglas fir as the best perch for experiencing the kaleidoscope of color and sound, scent and motion, scrambled his way to the top, and rode out the storm, lashed by the wind, holding on for dear life, relishing the harsh weather and taking it all in--its rich sensuality, its primal energy.

People all over our county are waiting to learn about a congregation of Christ's people who are adventurous enough to climb a tree in a storm and ride it out. No safe and secure, "We always do it this way." No easy traditions and unexamined doctrine. People are looking for a congregation of Christian friends who, like the early Christians in the Roman world, are following Jesus no matter where he leads. And, Christian friends are called to:

Live Authentically

Our recommendation letter needs to read that we are honest about who we are and willing to grow. The Corinthian church was not perfect. It was not even close. The Galatian church was so far off that Paul wrote a scathing letter to them. All the early churches experienced growing pains. They invited the world into their church and they dealt with what the world brought them. They were far from perfect either morally or doctrinally. But, at their core, these Christian friends were authentic and honest lovers of Jesus Christ.

Our children teach us about our need for authenticity. They challenge us when we are less than our teaching. They reflect back to us how we are actually living.

- A little boy was overheard praying: "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am."
- A Sunday school teacher asked her little children, as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One bright little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping,"
- The preacher was wired for sound with a lapel mike, and as he preached, he moved briskly about the platform, jerking the mike cord as he went. Then he moved to one side, getting wound up in the cord and nearly tripping before jerking it again. After several circles and jerks, a little girl in the third pew leaned toward her mother and whispered, "If he gets loose, will he hurt us?"

To be authentic we must be willing to admit our failures, engage our minds and hearts, and be willing to not take ourselves too seriously while we take the life and mission of Jesus Christ with utmost seriousness. Jesus teaches us to:

- Be with people on their turf,
- Be real, be vulnerable, and be honest,
- Be creative—do old things in new ways,
- Be spiritual---not churchy,
- Be patient,
- Be ready for surprises,
- Be willing to step outside your comfort zone,
- Be on the look out for where God is at work, and
- Be constantly praying, daily in touch with Jesus.

Most of all, Christian friends are called to:

Live by the Authority of Jesus Christ

Jesus life and teachings are our mission for life. If we, as a congregation, are a recommendation letter for Jesus, then Jesus' life and teachings are central to how we live with each other and how we relate to persons in the world. The world has one set of values to teach. The world has one way of living that is expected. Jesus has another path for us to follow.

Most people we meet at the grocery store, at a ball game, within the neighborhood, at work, or at school really believe: (from J.B. Phillips, *For This Day*,p.232)

- Happy are the pushers, for they will get on in the world.
- Happy are the hard-boiled, for they never let life hurt them.
- Happy are they who complain, for they get their own way in the end.
- Happy are the slave drivers, for they get results.
- Happy are the knowledgeable people of the world, for they know their way around.
- Happy are the troublemakers, for they make people take notice of them.

Those values and life practices reflected in the list above are not those of Jesus. As Christian friends you and I live under a different authority. Our life is to be lived by Jesus' values! Imagine yourself beside the Sea of Galilee and let the authority and the power of Jesus teach you. (Matthew 5:1-12: *The Message*)

- You're blessed when you feel you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God's rule.
- You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.
- You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.
- You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. God is food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.
- You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full, you find yourself cared for.
- You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.
- You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.
- Not only that---count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens---give a cheer, even!---for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

Christian friends!

We are Jesus' Recommendation Letter

Holy Scripture teaches us that we here at Chilson Hills are to be a recommendation letter for Jesus. When people hear about us, we want them to think of Jesus Christ. When people visit us, we want them to walk away knowing Jesus just a little better. When people are a part of Chilson Hills, we want them to be growing in a friendship with Jesus and with each other.

I have sought to identify the essential elements of Jesus' letter to the world that we are writing here. We are striving to live the adventure of a faith relationship with Jesus. We are seeking to be authentic, real people growing in our relationship and knowing that we have a long way to grow. We are committing and recommitting our lives to living under the authority of the Master Teacher, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

God is calling us to worship, to walk with faith, and to welcome all whom Jesus brings into our family of friends. Truly, the world waits for a group of people who will love like Jesus loved, live like Jesus lived, and be willing to die for the world, like Jesus did. Will you? Will we?