

Joan and I were in northern Indiana last week, driving to Valparaiso University. We had gotten off the interstate at Lafayette and were taking the back roads, going by dead reckoning along the country roads. Shortcuts, I call them, though they never are, but you see more. The farmers were out working their fields. We passed by this little farmhouse whose barn was snuggled up near the house. There were chickens loose, on the search for bugs, and a big oak tree with a porch swing. A few cows with their knobby-kneed calves. And out in the fields, was a farmer, an elderly man on an old tractor, the kind of tractor you'd see in a small-town parade, and he was pulling a manure spreader, and the manure was flying off the back end, arcing up, then falling onto the earth. Up at the barn was a pile of manure that had accumulated over the winter and there was a shovel or pitchfork, I couldn't tell, stuck in the pile, waiting for the man to fill the spreader again. It looked like a picture from *Life* magazine, from the 1940's.

I wondered how many years the man had lived there, how long he had teased a living from that ground. Every autumn taking something from it, every spring putting something back. Cultivating, I think it is called. Which the dictionary defines as "promoting or improving the growth of something by labor and attention."

We've been speaking about the various places we find wisdom, and how religions tend to limit wisdom to their own tradition. But sometimes we find wisdom in unexpected places. I've been talking about the Rotary Four Way Test, which I recently learned. Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Is it beneficial to all concerned? Today, I would like us to take up the third test: Will it build goodwill and better friendships? More specifically, I would like to speak about friendships, and their cultivation.

I received a phone call this past week from a friend near Washington D.C. We had grown up together and were very close at one time, but after school he had moved east, where he had married and had three children. His parents still live here, it was his mother's birthday, and he had phoned to ask me the name of the florist in Danville so he could send his mother flowers. It was wonderful speaking with him, but also a little sad, because it reminded me how close we had once been, and how we had allowed our friendship to waste away from neglect. For years, we had taken from that relationship, but had never gotten in the habit of putting anything back. We had failed to replenish the soil of friendship. We had stopped paying attention to it.

There is a perception that the best friendships are maintenance-free, that they just come naturally, requiring no time, work, or attention.

The movie *Love Story* is famous for the line, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” When John Lennon heard that line, he laughed and said, “Love means having to say you’re sorry every fifteen minutes.” Let’s see if we can’t strike a balance somewhere between the two.

Let’s imagine that friendship is a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum is the idea that good friendships happen by magic, with little effort on our part. You meet someone, you bond instantly, and are friends forever. Your friendship never requires any attention or work. You never have to say you’re sorry.

The other end of the spectrum sees friendship as a constant test, always at risk of dissolution if missteps are made. You must constantly prove your friendship and require others to prove their friendship by pleasing and placating you. When they fail to do that, the friendship is over. Someone is apologizing every fifteen minutes.

Now somewhere between those two ends is a place of healthy friendships and relationships. Where friendships are nurtured, not neglected. The soil of friendship is worked, the relationship is cultivated. Not worked constantly, for then something which was meant to be joyful becomes drudgery. But worked faithfully, wisely, and gladly.

I have a very close friend. When we first became friends, twenty years ago, I enjoyed his company so much I assumed he had lots of other friends. Over the years, I have noticed that while he does know and interact with many people, friendship is so important to him, he is careful not to have so many friends he can't cultivate and tend the relationship.

One of the reasons I enjoy his friendship is that for as long as I've known him, he has been committed to my growth. A true friend is interested in your growth. That means that while they love you, they won't always do whatever you wish. The best friend you'll ever have is the friend who helps you grow. If you're around people who call you friend, but they expect nothing from you, if they do not want you to grow or develop or mature, they are not your friend, no matter how much they insist otherwise. Good friendships begin with a commitment to care.

Growing up, we had a neighbor named Doctor Gibbs. He was a retired physician whose hobby was gardening. He had about six acres of land behind his house, and had tilled up a fourth of an acre for a vegetable garden. I remember asking him, I must have been eleven or so, why he didn't plow up his whole field and grow lots of vegetables, and he said, "I'd rather have a small garden with no weeds, than a big garden with lots of weeds."

When I think of that now, I think of the wisdom of not having more friendships than we can properly cultivate. There's an old saying that we can't have too many friends. Yes, we can. For when we do, we are unable to give any of them our proper attention, so our friendships remain superficial, rooted in shallow soil, unable to withstand the storms and winds of life. To build better friendships is to give them the proper time, energy, and attention they deserve.

What is true of our friendships with others is also true of our friendship with God. Do we give our friendship with God the proper time, energy, and attention it merits?

I was speaking this past Friday evening at a Methodist church near Chicago and a woman asked me whether my perception of prayer had changed over the years. I said it had, that I had grown up being taught prayer was largely about asking God to do something for you. But now I believed prayer had more to do with paying attention. Paying attention not only to the presence of God, but paying attention to people, which isn't easy, and something I don't always do well. Paying attention.

Cultivating our friendships with people, cultivating our friendship with God, by giving those relationships our energy, time, and attention. Taking something out, while always being careful to put something back.