



**Love Your Friends: Feminist Relational Ethics for Solidarity**  
**Mary E. Hunt November 9, 2013**  
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I first wrote a book entitled *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* in 1980. So I have been thinking about this topic for some years! In the meantime, I have given more attention to other justice issues, including war, people made poor by unjust economic systems, ecology, anti-racism, imperialism, and the like. But I remain convinced that one efficient route to global change for justice is “going and making friends in all nations” (Matt. 28:19) minus the part about baptizing them.

My remarks are in three sections:

1. A brief summary of my early work
2. An explanation of what I said on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Fierce Tenderness* by way of explaining how my thinking has changed or not
3. My current thinking on the topic of friendship in a quite new moment when same-sex marriage is legal

First, a word of apology that I do not speak in Swedish. Americans are notoriously poor in language study so my efforts to learn a bit of Swedish some years ago ended up with *matlag*, *puss*, *kram*, and not much more. So when you are part of our discussion, whether in person or in print, please feel free to participate in Swedish if you are more comfortable.

Second, a word about our context. I make no pretense of knowing much about Sweden. Of course I have been there several times—once memorably in the 1980’s when my bike was taken and tossed into the river in Uppsala on the first of May only to be returned, something that would never happen in the US. I have travelled as far north as Kiruna and to several cities in the south of Sweden. But lacking your language, I cannot pretend to know very much about the social context that, with all of its nuance, is very important on something as personal as friendship. The late Bishop Krister Stendahl (whom we at Harvard called “Sister Krister” for his support of women) explained that in English we say, “I love you,” while in Swedish you say, “I have met worse people than you.” Perhaps he exaggerated a bit but I got the message. So I will offer what I can from my perspective and look forward to our conversation.

**1. A brief summary of my early work**

I was somewhat amazed that people were reading my work from so many years ago. The article “Lovingly Lesbian” that some Swedish colleagues read was an early expression of the “fierce tenderness” that I later wrote about as women’s friendship.<sup>1</sup> I always intended friendship in the most political sense of the term, not some mushy word

on a greeting card that a capitalist society will gladly sell you to send to your friends. Rather, I meant the “fierce” part of friendship when someone can tell you how wrong you are on an important issue, or say that a prospective partner is not worthy of your affection, or that you need to pay more attention to your ageing parents. That is what friends are for!

I gave the “tenderness” side its due as well, expressing gratitude for women who have loved well, whose commitment to one another knows neither time nor space, whose bonds of affection have sparked social movements. I sensed that friendships around the globe might have kept people from blowing the world as we know it to bits.

I argued that friendship is made up of love and power, embodiment and spirituality. These four elements, lived in different constellations by different people, result in friendly relationships. I claimed that all friendships are sexual in one way or another because they are embodied. I acknowledged the limits of my own model—it does not magically make people friends nor does it guarantee anything about the quality of a friendship. Rather, it helps to name what is going on in those relationships that we call friendships, and provides a way of holding the various dimensions in tension.

In the same book, I wrote about the loss of friends, the inevitable deaths and the unhappy breakups of once brighter friendships. I began to sketch how we might celebrate friendships in cultures that have so long privileged marriage as the normative adult way of relating. I proposed that friendship and not marriage is foundational. After all, we can all be friends, but until relatively recently, and still not yet in most parts of the world, only some of us can be married. I suggested the importance of our non-human friends, our pets, Earth itself, perhaps even God. After all, this was a feminist *theology* not sociology of friendship, an attempt to say something about the Divine Matrix in which we live that, in my view, includes both human efforts and divine grace.

Reaction to my work was generally positive from progressive people, especially women, even more so from lesbian women, who finally found something of their own experiences reflected in the book. They could relate to my examples of women friends, and they were heartened by my claim that friendship is quite sufficient for human interactions. Fortunately, the work was generally ignored by those who are too conservative to be open to new possibilities, though it certainly did not enhance my reputation as a Catholic theologian in their eyes.

## **2. An explanation of what I said on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Fierce Tenderness***

Twenty years after I wrote the book, I was asked to reflect on it for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition in 2009. I wrote that on rereading *Fierce Tenderness* after having written it nearly two decades ago, I was struck by how much I liked it! That may seem odd or even proud for a writer to say about her own work. In fact, many of us are not pleased with our products when we finish them, and less so when we read them later. By contrast, I realized I still believe what I wrote. The style and tone still reflect my approach to theological ethics, to friends, and friendship.

Of course, I have changed in twenty years, and I have changed my mind on some questions. But I still affirm that a feminist theo-ethical approach to friendship was a good idea and remains a good idea, albeit in need of more exploration.

Twenty years later, the life data on which the book inevitably relied has grown and deepened. My partner, Diann Neu, continues to be friend, lover, and partner without peer. We have entered into motherhood together, welcoming a child into our friendship

with all the fun and challenges that parenthood entails. I have lost friends along the way. Some have died. Others have receded because of distance or differences. I have made new friends. Happily, I continue to find Divine Energy to be a friendly force.

When I read it this time, I was surprised by the degree to which *Fierce Tenderness* is based on same-sex love and at the same time applicable more widely. I think that was unusual in 1991, so I am glad for the clarity and boldness. But I am disappointed twenty years later at how some things have not changed—specifically, how rare it is for lesbian women’s experience, even for heterosexual women’s experience, to be seen as normative, typical of human behavior as a whole. My concern is not so much for same-sex rights but for social justice, which includes having women’s love for women seen as the real thing.

The book has many limits, as several reviewers were quick to point out. I would be the first to say it needs more racial/ethnic and national variety. It reflects a white, Catholic, U.S. middle class worldview in ways that are honest but inadequate. More dialogue with people of color, folks who live outside the United States, and/or even more examples from literature would enhance the arguments. Men are conspicuously missing even though I, like most women, have close male friends whose care and insights are sometimes as fierce and tender as those of many women. A theological reflection on female-male friendships that are not defined by marriage remains to be written.

This work is newly complicated by the welcome emergence of transgender persons, who are reshaping the landscape when it comes to thinking about sex and gender. Now we are no longer so clear about what constitutes a woman or a man, what makes someone lesbian or gay, how to think about bisexuality. But as we sort through the issues, an unwavering commitment to love and justice, inclusivity and connection is helpful. That commitment undergirds this work so that even insofar as it is time-bound in its sources it is intended to be timeless in its embrace of friends of all kinds.

The biggest social change since the publication of *Fierce Tenderness* is the phenomenon of same-sex marriage. It is now legal in many countries and 14 states in the U.S. This is significant because one of the points I made to ground my claims for the importance of friendship over marriage was the fact that same-sex couples were barred from marrying. Domestic partnerships, civil unions, and other approximations of legal committed love were not yet on the books. It is hard to recall those days!

Despite this development, I think friendship remains a central ethical issue from a religious perspective. Same-sex marriage is a matter of justice. If heterosexual people can marry, then obviously same-sex lovers should have the same privilege. But what is obscured by this liberal analysis is the deeper matter of what marriage means, why we privilege some relationships and ignore or mistreat others. When I wrote *Fierce Tenderness*, one out of three U.S. marriages ended in divorce. Now it is one out of two, suggesting that perhaps marriage is not the best way to structure a society.

I rededicated the book to my friends (especially and more intensely than ever to my partner, Diann Neu), who embody fierce tenderness. I added to the list our daughter, Catherine Fei-Min Hunt-Neu, who hopefully enjoys fierce and tender friendships in greater measure because of my work.

Now, I have an even more nuanced way of thinking about friendship.

### 3. My current thinking on the topic

My lawyer reports that people in the U.S. under age thirty-five plan to get married regardless of the gender constellation of their mates. Her older clients, like me, are ambivalent at best about marriage to anyone. We prefer to live out our affective relationships without benefit of clergy and outside the law, at least until it becomes too costly to do so as I discovered recently. The Internal Revenue Service's decision to open joint tax filings to all married people, the potential to receive a partner's Social Security benefits if s/he predeceases one, and the ease of transferring major assets without tax consequences make it hard, finally imprudent if one has children, to resist marriage's charms. How romantic!

Opening marriage to more people, while a social justice victory on its face, on more careful examination is a chance to think about what kind of society we really want. I want one with lots of friends, some of whom might choose to marry, many of whom will not. Marriage does not make people friends. It creates legal ties that govern shared property, inheritance, and the like. The rest one has to do for oneself and/or with the support of a community.

A feminist exploration of the phenomenon from an explicitly lesbian Catholic perspective is an invitation to broaden what friendship means in common experience and parlance, indeed to increase its normativity both in and outside of marriage. Some Catholic hierarchs are trying to coopt the term "friendship" as a sexless also-ran to marriage. This is part of their efforts to keep same-sex marriage from spreading across the country, state by state, while they bemoan the end of the institution of heterosexual marriage as we know it.

Many of my friends who have lived for decades in committed relationship are scratching their heads. When we talk about our partners, our friends, our significant others, whether one or more, we mean the terms in robust, multi-dimensional ways, terms of endearment that are at least as significant as spouse, wife, or husband but not nearly so laden with baggage. Most of us are deciding to marry for economic reasons, which we in no way confuse with love and care. Friendship not marriage undergirds our commitments. That is a conversation worth having especially with younger friends and colleagues whose experiences are quite different insofar as they have grown up expecting that same-sex couples can marry. Why would they necessarily think beyond the box? But what might they miss?

My starting point for this work is as a theologically trained person who works at the intersection of scholarship and activism. As the longtime co-director of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER), I am privileged to lecture and write without the usual constraints of academia or a religious tradition, in my case Catholicism.<sup>ii</sup> I can extend and expand the contours of my tradition without worrying that authorities will revoke my tenure or pull my license to teach. This allows me to listen to the *sensus fidelium*, the real life experiences of people, and craft theo-ethical possibilities accordingly.

WATER's goal is to promote the use of feminist religious values in the work of social change. We do so through both scholarship and activism, both pastoral ministry and collaboration with other justice seekers of many and no religious commitments. Perhaps our most important effort is to live the future we envision, especially in a small office where we have welcomed people of many relational commitments. The operative

word is “welcomed” as the commitments can and do change. We are proud of our diverse group of interns and staff who, over the thirty years of WATER’s life, have woven a wonderful web of ongoing relationships.

One might wonder why I look so carefully at things Catholic with regard to friendship. Catholicism is the largest Christian denomination in the US with considerable political pressure. My reason for focusing there is twofold: first, the misuse of the term friendship by some Catholic hierarchs muddies the waters, distracting from the real issue which is that institutional Catholic teaching has been anti-queer, anti-body, and anti-female for generations with wide impact. Second, off-the-cuff comments by Pope Francis on sexuality have astonished many people around the world.<sup>iii</sup> He seems to walk away from the notion that same-sex love is “objectively disordered” as his recent papal predecessors claimed. When such a simple, obvious statement as “Who am I to judge?” makes front page news around the world I conclude that the institutional Roman Catholic Church, especially the pope, still exercises more clout than I wish it did. If this is to persist, then it is important to clarify what is useful and what is not. It is also helpful to emphasize that just because something comes from the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church it does not mean it is accepted Catholic teaching.

#### *Friendship in Context*

In Washington, DC, it is said that if you want a friend it is best to buy a dog. The social utility Facebook invites people to “friend” one another, meaning to be in direct contact via its website. To “de-friend” someone means to take him or her out of one’s Facebook access list. Thus, the longtime noun became a verb in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2010.<sup>iv</sup> All of this informs the contemporary meaning of friendship for theo-ethical purposes. It points to the ubiquity of friendship and the value most people place on it. It is also a sign that friendship may be taking a hit as the overuse of the term among millions of Facebook users can trivialize it. This, in my view, is to be avoided.

The history of Christian considerations of friendship is not terribly robust.<sup>v</sup> Most scholars trace the roots to Aristotle. His *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8, contains a rigorous discussion of the various kinds of friendships, culminating in “virtuous” ones that unite good people.<sup>vi</sup> Aristotle and early Christian writers who based their thinking on his work did not have women at the forefront of their imaginations. Women were not envisioned as friends with one another, nor were men thought to have friendships with women. Social superiority of men precluded this. Hence the history of Christian thinking on friendship was predicated on male-male relationships in a hetero-normative world that did not include a sexual dimension, a shaky foundation at best.

Of course some male owners had sex with their male slaves, male teachers with their male students, and the like, but those were quite different from the friendships of virtuous men. Friendship was seen as a category distinct from romantic love, certainly not something that men and women engaged in. Friendship was not envisioned as a hallmark of same-sex love. Friends were friends and lovers were lovers, for better, or usually, as I observe it, for worse. Marriages were not commonly contracts between friends, but between those that families deemed convenient for business and/or social purposes. What were often called “loveless marriages” are better described as unions lacking in friendship. The bottom line is that a theology of marriage arose completely divorced, as it were, from friendship. I think we have the experience and insight now to do better.

Contemporary feminist theological studies of friendship have challenged this one-sided approach to the topic. British theologian Elizabeth Stuart in her book *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships* looked at the complexity of weaving sex into friendships.<sup>vii</sup> She writes: “We are called to be passionate friends to each other and to God who is Passionate Friend.”<sup>viii</sup> Dr. Stewart bases her theology on the experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people at a time of homophobia. But there is every reason to think that the insights that accrue from such friendships are applicable across the board. Just as fashion and music take their cues from the queer community, so too does ethics in this case. Granted, this is the nightmare of religious conservatives, but we are all better dressed and more sophisticated musically! So, too, might we look forward to a friendlier world. Margins are often zones of creativity as the LGBTIQ community has proven over and over if only to survive. While same-sex marriage will function to dull the edges of such difference, I am hopeful that even this gentle reminder of a proud history of same-sex loving friends will catalyze imitation.

In *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*,<sup>ix</sup> I see generativity as a hallmark of friendship.<sup>x</sup> I have watched this play out among my friends, indeed played it out myself over three decades. I can report that the relationships are every bit as sexual as marital ones, and in many instances far more long lasting, satisfying, safe, and romantic. It is decades of sexual friendship not months of marriage that define my relationship with my partner. Why not teach young people about that rather than perpetuating the marriage industrial complex and consigning even more people to fewer choices?

In such a model, there is no reason to single out a sexual partnership as somehow qualitatively different from other friendships. Friendship is articulated in a range of ways, including a range of erotic expressions. Rather than separating sex as something one engages in with a lover, it is far healthier and safer to see friendship as the basis on which one engages in sex. Intimate sexual contact in all of its complexity is most appropriate between friends. Friendship is the bedrock of all love relationships. It is a good foundation. The most intimate and involved friendships can cause the most joy as well as the most pain. Friendship is risky. But why not teach young people to make friends instead of simply hooking up? Naïve perhaps, but imagine the possibilities.

Of course not every friendship is genitally sexually explicit. Nor is every genital sexual relationship a friendship. But in the mix of how such experiences are thought about ethically from a queer perspective, it is important to hold the two concepts—sex and love—together. Otherwise, wonderful dimensions of friendship are lost in intimate relationships. Spouses get treated one way, friends another. In a patriarchal society this often translates into women being mistreated and abused because they are not necessarily friends of their spouses. Men get hurt as well when women treat them like Kleenex instead of friends and vice versa.

Many progressive theo-ethical scholars have raised serious questions about same-sex marriage even though we are in agreement with the equality dimension.<sup>xi</sup> We are concerned that the focus on couples takes away from the common good. Pressure to marry for economic reasons is increasing with equal marriage in the United States. For example, same-sex partner benefits in some situations have been pulled back and are now only available to those who are married. One couple I know has been together for more than thirty years. If they marry they will lose access to one member’s former spouse’s Social Security benefits. If they don’t marry, they can no longer share insurance coverage

that was permitted to domestic partners. Since “all” can marry in their state, the company that carries the insurance requires that people be married in order to take advantage of the benefit. Rethinking the whole matter of social connections as if friendship not marriage were foundational would result in justice for many more people. That opportunity seems all but lost this time around as same-sex marriage serves to reinforce the normativity of marriage.

Marriage is generally perceived to be the default adult human relationship. But in fact census data for 2010 show that only 48% of U.S. households are made up of people who are married.<sup>xii</sup> As same-sex marriage becomes increasingly available in the states, this percentage may go above half again. But the trajectory seems clear: a variety of ways of organizing daily life are increasingly chosen by (or imposed on) more people. Included in this picture are those women with dependent children whose usually male partners shirk their responsibilities, that is, who do not act as friends. But in the main, relational variety from single to polyamorous, from hetero coupled to same-sex coupled, from community to cosmos is increasingly normative if not economically feasible. Who can afford to turn down the more than one thousand federal differences that accrue to those who are married? Still, I urge an examination of friendship because married people can, and in my view ought to be friends.

Friendship today is a broad rubric that encompasses all of these options and need not be confined to any of them. The writer Richard Cohen’s friendship with the author Nora Ephron is a classic contemporary example. They were “intense platonic lovers of one another in a way that Harry or Sally never could appreciate.”<sup>xiii</sup> When she died, Mr. Cohen wrote, “I never let go of her hand,” as plaintive a cry as I have ever heard, and yes, sexual in its own way though they were not lovers.

Another writer, Emily Rapp, describes her evolving view of friendship. She learns from expat work friends that a group of seeming “old maids” are anything but: “friendships between women are often the deepest and most profound love stories, but they are often discussed as if they are ancillary, ‘bonus’ relationships to the truly important ones.”<sup>xiv</sup> When her young child is diagnosed with a fatal illness, Emily Rapp realizes that her women friends will see her through. “Support, salvation, transformation, life: this is what women give to one another when they are true friends, soul friends, what the Irish call *anam cara*.” She calls it what it is—love—and never looks back. There is no mention of marriage, but plenty of embodiment as her friends literally hold her up through a tragic time.

Friendships between gay men and heterosexual women, between lesbians and heterosexual men add another dimension to the relational model. Scholar Anna Muraco explores these previously ignored examples of people who bond just as readily as any others.<sup>xv</sup> Of course such friends address issues of sexuality; erotic attachments have various expressions, not all of which are genital in nature, though some may be. Again, the variety of ways that humans form bonds is the most interesting observation. More variety can be expected as gender and sexuality are increasingly understood as fluid, changing, dynamic.

Trans people bring their own rich uniqueness to friendship. Previously fixed categories fly out the window and new, brilliant expressions of friendship flourish for which most people do not have names. To date there is not much written about this. But as stories begin to emerge, it is clear that many couples who stay together through one

person's transition (perhaps both people in some cases) emerge as friends even though public categories that formerly defined them have changed.

People who change genders reconfigure their friendship constellations accordingly. For example, in a Male-Female transgender case, the husband becomes a wife. The original or initial wife goes from being heterosexually identified to being lesbian identified because her spouse is now a woman. Is that really how she sees herself? This is not a trivial matter, rather a lesson to all who bond, including heterosexually married people. We learn that friendships can endure and be constitutive of many good long-term relationships without reliance on gender categories.

How a friendship is sexual is the concern of those who are involved, not those who would seek to label. Moreover, the trans example shows how feeble are our efforts to name and categorize people, how precarious our insights into human relationships, how shaky the scaffolding of our society if we put too much credence in defining others rather than according them the courtesy of defining themselves. For example, the wife of the trans man now woman did not magically decide she was a lesbian. She could be a heterosexual woman who simply loves her friend who was her husband. The point is that everything is in flux. Formerly useful explanatory constructs like heterosexual and homosexual are rapidly coming to the end of their usefulness. Let friendship be enough especially in these times of social transformation.

### *Playing the Friendship Card*

The logic of a Roman Catholic kyriarchal pro-marriage position would seem to be to encourage not discourage same-sex marriage in order to experience the least social disruption from the current norm. That Catholic hierarchs oppose it is remarkable, enough to make me wonder if once they figure out just how conservative marriage really is they will become the biggest proponents in the world. After all, what better way than marriage to maintain a two-by-two social structure and social constraints on sexual expression outside of marriage? I understand their arguments about the need for a man and a woman but apparently they are ignorant of contemporary studies, queer theory, and other sources that have rendered their anthropology outdated.

Pope Francis, when he was Cardinal Bergoglio in Argentina, allegedly supported civil unions when he realized that the government of President Cristina Kirchner would approve equal marriage there. American hierarchs have pledged allegiance to the National Organization for Marriage in their efforts to defeat marriage equality. But the tide has turned culturally, and it is generally accepted that equal marriage is a given in the United States. Seeing this handwriting on the wall, there is a new "charm offensive" by the bishops that offers friendship not marriage to same-sex loving people. This is not what I am promoting, and that they are promoting it means it requires critical examination.

Cardinal Timothy Dolan on an Easter Sunday 2013 ABC News program "This Week" was questioned about his views: "What do you say to a gay couple who says, we love God, we love the church, but we also love each other and we want to raise a family in faith? What do you say to them?" He replied, "The first thing I say is, I love you, too. You were made in God's image and likeness. We want your happiness. And you're entitled in friendship. But we also know that God has told us the way to happiness, in



terms of sexual love, that is intended only for a man and a woman in marriage where children can come about naturally.”<sup>xvi</sup> I respectfully differ.

“Entitled in friendship” is an odd phrase. I am not quite sure what it means, but I get Cardinal Dolan’s drift: heterosexual people can have sex without necessarily being friends while same-sex loving people can have friendship without sex. Marriage is the prize; friendship is the “also ran” that benevolent people permit those who are less fortunate, i.e., not heterosexual, to enjoy. According to this logic, marriage includes sex; friendship does not. I disagree. Friendship, in my view, is the foundation of healthy, mature, adult relationships, surely the sort that any religious leaders would want to be the basis of a marriage contract or covenant. And friendships are erotic in that they include body-related expressions of love no matter what the bishops might think.

The formulation is mistaken in three key ways. First, no one is “entitled” to friendship as if some people are not so entitled. Friendship is a human experience available potentially to everyone without needing the permission of anyone. To suggest that friendship is for one group and marriage, with its many civil perks, is for another group is either bigoted, absurd, or both. Human rights are human rights.

Second, religions have no direct line to the divine. While a cardinal may affirm a certain religious tradition that teaches that marriage should be between people of different sex/gender, at issue today is a legal matter in a democratic country not a theological point to be debated among members of a religious group. No religious group is free to dictate their views to the larger public, a lesson the Catholic hierarchs are learning painfully state by state. The U.S. electorate has evolved beyond a “for heteros only” notion of marriage.

Third, it is disingenuous at best, pernicious at worst, to claim to love people and want their happiness and then urge rank discrimination against them. One simply cannot have it both ways. Or, to use the guiding metaphor of this discussion, it is not something that friends do. Sociology, psychology, and anthropology have produced theories and data that prove same-sex love to be healthy and natural to the satisfaction of most people. Some religious people, myself included, have added that same-sex love, like mixed-sex love, is morally neutral. Lived well, all love can be conducive of the common good.<sup>xvii</sup> Social consensus takes time but the trajectory on marriage equality is obvious.

One large missing piece in the logic here is the reality of sex in friendship, not to mention the lack of sex in some marriages. I am not sure how or why the bishops overlook these matters, but the distinctions that they rely on simply do not exist anywhere but in their imaginations.

Words mean something, and the bishops cannot redefine them to suit their purposes. Friendships are sexual. Whether they include genital expression or not is the business of those who are in them. But it is a category error to separate friendship from marriage. There is no basis for thinking that some people are eligible for friendships and others are eligible for marriage. In fact, when everyone can be a friend and equal legal marriage is increasingly available the distinction does not hold up. It is rather like saying some people can eat and others can drink. It does not make sense to say so when everyone does both.

### *Let Friendships Flourish*

I am delighted to see that several decades since I first attended to friendship as a key theo-ethical matter it is becoming a central concept. I reject, and correct the bishops’

improper use of the term while I embrace friendship as an erotic experience that invites theo-ethical reflection. Work remains to be done in rethinking sexual ethics as if friendship and not marriage were normative.

In my view, the underlying reason for all of this consideration is to build solidarity. The atomized nature of the world as we know it is designed to keep us from seeing one another as fellow creatures. It dovetails nicely with advanced capitalism, privatizing and prioritizing dyads, at most small families, and communities, even countries over against the rest of us. If we do not have friends “in all nations” then the motivation to understand and appreciate difference is diminished, the urgency to respect the planet we share, and the basic justice that accrues to all of creation are lost. So making friends is a logical and effective strategy for creating a world I envision.

Some contours are helpful to start the process. Biblical texts are one starting point. “Love your enemy” is a commonly used Christian biblical quote (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27). However, it is striking that there is no concomitant biblical invitation to “love your friends.” Like so many dimensions of Christianity, the injunction to love those who act against us leads to widespread confusion and a lack of coherence on the relational front. Loving enemies is not appropriate in every instance. For example, in cases of sexual abuse, especially incest, loving the enemy can put one in danger.

Biblical texts that focus on laying down one’s life for one’s friends, not being servants but friends, etc., invite critical analysis as resources for relational ethics. “Love your friends” would be a very useful thing to teach, possibly redundant insofar as friendship includes love, but a good reminder of the obvious. I puzzle as to why no religion seems to have thought of it. For me, it is a sacred text born of experience and hope.

The witness of so many good people’s lives serves as data for relational ethics. Those are the “texts” that persuade me. I marvel at the blessing of nearly thirty-five years of committed friendship with my partner. But I also rejoice in forty-five years of friendship with two high school classmates, more than fifty-five years of friendship with a grade school friend, lifelong strong bonds with several family members, not to mention now almost forty years with Swedish friend Ann-Cathrin Jarl. Longevity is not the measure of friendship, but when coupled with faithful companionship through thick and thin it is important.

The part of old age I dread the most is losing my friends. It is heart warming to see elderly people form new friendships in extended care communities and nursing homes, even more heartening to see faithful friends accompany one another to the end, and who knows, perhaps beyond life. There may be more to friendship than we now know.

The stories are many and varied on how friendships play out over time. Let me share some. Two friends I know lived on different continents. They saw one another as frequently as time and finances permitted, both being actively involved in their careers and one even having a partner who eventually became ill and died. These two friends made technology work for themselves, phoning and emailing, even Skyping when it became possible though they were of an age when it was almost unheard of! Their love sustained both of them in their later years despite the geographic distance.

Another couple of friends lived a similar closeness at a distance in different countries until one developed dementia. The other continues to visit regularly and

maintain the tie, sure that if the shoe were on the other foot that the friend would do the same. Still another couple of friends has retired together in a setting they both enjoy. They pursue quite different interests but relish their coming together at day's end for a drink and dinner to debrief their activities. Yet one more couple of friends shared many great years, a robust family, and plenty of international travel. When one died, the other went to the end of the earth, literally, to scatter the friend's ashes. These are fierce and tender loves.

Try to figure out which of these people were married or not, which were couples of women, of men, mixed couples. It does not matter. Their friendships speak for themselves. Marriage is immaterial, or better, only material. Friendship is the crucial tie in each case, and I suspect more broadly as well.

Young people's whose high and growing approval ratings of marriage equality assure that marriage as such is not going out of style. But while we read a lot about hook-up culture, there are less glitzy stories of young people forming all manner of friendships with sexual and gender permutations the like of which most people over forty can scarcely imagine. For example, a young lesbian woman who worked with me decided she wanted to become a man and did so successfully. Then she could marry her girlfriend and share the benefits of health insurance and the like that was prohibited to her in a state that will be among the last to approve same-sex marriage. They remain happily married friends regardless of their genders.

Many young people I know are not so concerned about gender configurations as they are about shared values, interests, and commitments. Many of them are sexually involved in one-way or another, but some are not, and the distinction is not definitive. This is simply the result of less rigid lines of identity and greater flexibility/freedom to seek the companionship one wants. Young women, like older women, tend to be more flexible in their gender identity and sexual orientation(s) than most men. And, like their older counterparts, they tend to have more in common with heterosexual women as women than they do with gay men as queer people. Sexism remains a defining social structure.

Group houses are common for post-college age people in urban areas, often a mix of men and women, couples and singles that affords a palatable living option. Without romanticizing the challenges of living with anyone, it is important to note that such arrangements would have been frowned upon in previous generations. Even today some such housing is considered illegal under local statutes that prevent more than x number of unmarried people from cohabitating in one house. The law needs to catch up with the culture in this regard.

Polyamory is a complicated matter, but there are people who find that they want to be in more than one sexually intimate friendship at a time. I must say I have rarely seen it sustained over a long period. One friend usually ends up wanting more exclusivity and/or more attention than is possible when one is sharing intimately with two or more people. But in cases where it does work, it works. There is no point in denying it.

For example, one set of friends I know find that having more than one partner for one of them helps to offset the negative aspects of putting too much expectation on one person for sexual and emotional intimacy. Things work better when those aspects are shared. Another set of friends tried polyamory and found that it did not work for them. With children involved it was difficult to explain, hard to orchestrate. They found other

ways to be friends. Regardless, these are real human situations that deserve respect, support, and especially among helping professionals, an open mind toward what is possible even if one does not embrace it for oneself.

There is newfound interest in those who declare themselves asexual.<sup>xviii</sup> They, too, form friendships but apparently do not consider sex an important component. Variety is the name of the game. The task of postmodern Christian relational ethics is to figure out how to create and sustain a just and welcoming society based on more not fewer options. Learning to live with variety, making laws and policies that encourage and enhance lots of choices rather than extending a normative (i.e., marriage) approach is the work ahead.

Many religious and even secular conservatives reject such relational variation calling it a sign of moral decay. I propose that we celebrate the flourishing of friendship against great odds—the marriage industrial complex, the economic pressures to prioritize career over family, and the rape culture that commodifies women’s bodies for men’s pleasure. Friends are an antidote to all of those things. It is time to say so and to teach young people how to be friends rather than how to date. It is especially important for young women to see us with our friends—showing them what sisterhood looks like in all of its glory.

Celebrations of friendships, if they exist at all, are usually much more low-key than a full dress wedding. I note that many of my friends who are getting married after decades together now that the laws are changing emphasize more their friendship than their coupledness. Their relationships often last longer than the average marriage as well. One couple explained on their wedding invitation that they had become engaged twenty-three years before but that the state had just caught up with their love by allowing equal marriage. They reaffirmed their friendship through marriage vows. It made a lot of sense.

Reshaping our economy to accommodate everyone instead of privileging a few more people via marriage equality is a distant dream. But it is one worth having. Sexual violence is a product of a culture in which sex is decoupled from friendship. That terrible chasm could be bridged with attention to friendship, adding urgency to the task. Marriages, insofar as they emerge from friendships, tend to be far more community-focused, safer, and perhaps in the long run rarer since the very things that marriages are set up to protect (finances, children, etc.) will be shared more widely. Perhaps it really does take a village, a village of friends.

As a step in this direction I encourage using the term “friend” as often as possible. I want to get people accustomed to it as one default norm, to value friends as much as partners, to see spouses as first and foremost friends, and then to reflect on the various dimensions of their own friendships. There are few people who do not have any friends; there are many people who have lots of friends. Seeing friends in a new light, including the erotic, that is, in a bodily-expressed way, is revealing. It points toward valuing the love and care present among friends rather than pining for marriage that is not all there is.

I trust that these insights will go a long way toward replacing outmoded ethics with useful models of human relating. At least there will be conversations in which loving friends will be engaged about loving friends! My friends and I will be grateful.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Hunt, Mary E, "Lovingly Lesbian: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship." *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, by James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994.

<sup>ii</sup> The Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER) is a non-profit educational organization in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA.  
[www.waterwomensalliance.org](http://www.waterwomensalliance.org).

<sup>iii</sup> See my article "Will Francis' Statements on Women and Gays 'Make a Mess' Inside the Church?"  
[http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/7216/will\\_francis\\_statements\\_on\\_women\\_and\\_gays\\_make\\_a\\_mess\\_inside\\_the\\_church](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/7216/will_francis_statements_on_women_and_gays_make_a_mess_inside_the_church).

<sup>iv</sup>[http://friendship.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=friendship&cdn=people&tm=42&f=20&su=p284.13.342.ip\\_&tt=8&bt=9&bts=9&zu=http%3A//www.huffingtonpost.com/irene-s-levine/bff-makes-the-oxford-engl\\_b\\_721814.html](http://friendship.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=friendship&cdn=people&tm=42&f=20&su=p284.13.342.ip_&tt=8&bt=9&bts=9&zu=http%3A//www.huffingtonpost.com/irene-s-levine/bff-makes-the-oxford-engl_b_721814.html).

<sup>v</sup> For some of the background see Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002.

<sup>vi</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1953, especially Book 8, chapter 2 and 6.

<sup>vii</sup> Elizabeth Stewart, *Just Good Friends: Towards a Lesbian and Gay Theology of Relationships*. London: Mowbray, 1995.

<sup>viii</sup> Stewart, p. 246.

<sup>ix</sup> Hunt, Chapter 4.

<sup>x</sup> Hunt, p. 99.

<sup>xi</sup> "Same-Sex Marriage and Relational Justice," Roundtable Discussion in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Fall 2004, Volume 20, Number 2, pp. 83-117.

<sup>xii</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/us/26marry.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/us/26marry.html?_r=0).

<sup>xiii</sup> Richard Cohen, "When Richard Met Nora: A Friendship Out of the Movies," July 2, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/my-friendship-with-nora-ephron/2012/07/02/gJQAfCLGJW\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/my-friendship-with-nora-ephron/2012/07/02/gJQAfCLGJW_story.html).

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<sup>xiv</sup> Emily Rapp, "Transformation and Transcendence: The Power of Female Friendship," January 22, 2012, <http://therumpus.net/2012/01/transformation-and-transcendence-the-power-of-female-friendship/>.

<sup>xv</sup> Anna Muraco, *Odd Couples: Friendships at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

<sup>xvi</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/video/cardinal-timothy-dolan-week-interview-easter-sunday-18849751>.

<sup>xvii</sup> Mary E. Hunt, "Just Good Sex," in *Good Sex*, edited by Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt and Radhika Balakrishnan. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001, pp. 158-173.

<sup>xviii</sup> See the website for the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, <http://www.asexuality.org/home/>.