

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 23, 2024

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

on

Mark 4:35-41

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Sit a little closer

IT WAS THEN that the fox appeared. “Good morning,” said the fox.
“Good morning,” the little prince answered politely. [...]

“Come and play with me,” the little prince proposed. [...]

“I can’t play with you,” the fox said. “I’m not tamed.” [...]

“What does tamed mean?”

“It’s something that’s been too often neglected. It means, ‘to create ties’...”

“To create ties?”

“That’s right,” the fox said. “For me you’re only a little boy just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you have no need of me, either. For you I’m only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, we’ll need each other. You ’ll be the only boy in the world for me. I’ll be the only fox in the world for you...” [...]

“The only things you learn are the things you tame,” said the fox. “If you want a friend, tame me!” [...]

“Here is my secret. It’s quite simple: One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.” [...] You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed”.

It always is a delight to revisit this vignette from *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. It goes straight to the heart of how relationships grow into friendships and love within couples becomes deep and durable. Of course, you do not ‘tame’ a friend or a partner. This is poetic language and Saint-Exupéry explains it: “It means ‘to create ties’”.

How is it that I feel tied to a particular person more than to any other person in the world? That he or she becomes unique for me, like no one else? That we can build a life together? That every trait of this person becomes dear to me, including his or her flaws, his or her moods: the color of his hair, the way he walks, laughs, sleeps, plays, talks? That we feel comfortable with each other, can spend time together, talk for hours, or stay silent together? That our lives start depending on each other, are intertwined, and eventually overflow – become hospitable, a space where other people feel welcome and valued?

You might think that what creates this kind of tie is love – but this is not the right answer. Love comes in many forms. I can love people who do not love me back. I think of these missionary nuns I met in China many years ago who cared for the elderly, for people with disabilities, and lepers: they did not have special ties with all the people they helped, but this did not prevent the nuns from loving them and caring for all of them in the same way. Think also of the sad moments in our lives when marriages break or grow cold, friends betray us: the tie is threatened or severed, we are hurt, but we still love these persons – actually it is *because* we still love the partner or the friend who betray us that we feel such pain. So, no, it is not love that creates ties.

So what is it? Let us go back to the passage where Saint-Exupéry explains how the little prince befriends the fox:

[The Fox said]: if you want a friend, tame me!” “What do I have to do?” asked the little prince. “You have to be very patient,” the fox answered. “First you ’ll sit down a little way away from me, over there, in the grass. I’ll watch you out of the corner of my eye, and you won’t say anything. [...] But day by day, you’ll be able to sit a little closer...”

This passage points to something which can only be built over time, that nobody can force on another – something that only little by little draws people closer to each other, to open up to each other without fear.

The closer I get to another person, physically, but especially emotionally, the more vulnerable I become. I need to sense whether it is really safe for me to get this close – and there is no other way to do this than taking time, being patient, going slowly, until I know, not so much with my mind, *but with my heart* that, yes, I can *trust* him or her.

“Here is my secret –says the fox-. It’s quite simple: One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”

Only trust creates meaningful, durable, deep ties – because only trust sees what is invisible to the eyes, perceives with the heart.

You might have come across this anonymous sentence often quoted on social media – clearly because people feel it perfectly captures the point made by *The Little Prince*:

“I trust you is a better compliment than I love you because you may not always trust the person you love but you can always love the person you trust”.

In all our relations, especially those that matter most to us, the challenge is always the same: how to go from fear to trust.

And when I say all relationships, I mean *all* relationships: with friends, with my partner, with co-workers, within church communities, and indeed also with God.

This charming vignette from *The Little Prince* can be seen as a depiction of the way God deals with us, and gives us an insight on Jesus' attitude in today's Gospel.

The disciples' boat is caught in a storm, they have Jesus with them, and they speak reproachfully to him: "Do you really care about us?"

Jesus effortlessly calms the sea, stills the wind, then turns to them and says: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?", which means: "Do you still not *trust* me?"

The disciples admired Jesus, followed him, were puzzled by him, and yet still they resisted Jesus' desire to be friends with them – as Jesus himself says: "I called you friends" (John 15.15) – because they could not bring themselves to trust him.

Jesus though never gave up on them. Just as with the little prince and the fox, he was intent on 'taming' them, patiently helping them to overcome their fear, and learn that they could trust him.

When Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he does not say to the people: "I am God, you must believe in what I teach you and do everything I tell you to do".

Instead, he simply starts spending time with his disciples. Just as the little prince with the fox, he chose "to be very patient", knowing that "day by day, the disciples would eventually allow him to come a little closer...", would eventually start trusting him.

He did this with the disciples then, and so he does with us now.

Faith in God does not mean that we have to know everything about him from day one (we never will). Reservations about God, even doubts, are not an obstacle in the relation with him.

The only thing we have to keep doing is "play with God" as the fox does with the little prince – that is give God the opportunity to come closer to us, slowly, patiently, day by day. God does not want us to *obey* him, *fear* him, not even *love* him. Love can wait, it will come later. What matters *now* is that we let him tame us, that is prove to us that we can trust him.

Just open the Gospel of Mark, and start reading the first chapters: you will find that it is only in chapter 12 that love for God is mentioned! Love comes later – instead, Jesus' invitation from day one, constantly reiterated, is this: have faith in me, that is *trust me*.

And if there is one quality the whole Scripture ascribes to God above any other is this: that he is *faithful*, that is *trustworthy*.

There is no deeper love, no more valuable gift we can give to each other in life – to our friends, to our partner, to every person we interact with – than this: to be *trustworthy*.

Trust makes our friends, our partner feel secure, gives them confidence and inner strength, helps them to overcome any challenge in life. Nothing heals others more than proving to them that they can rely on us, trust us – and show how much we want to trust them in return.

No one though will ever be more deserving of our trust that the God who calls us friends and gives his life for us. Nothing more than trust in this God heals our hearts from the inevitable betrayals we all experience in our lives sooner or later.

Ultimately, only trust in God will give us the patience we need to never give up, keep trying, constantly resume the never-ending play of *taming*:

“First you ’ll sit down a little way away from me, over there, in the grass. I’ll watch you out of the corner of my eye, and you won’t say anything. But day by day, you’ll be able to sit a little closer...” .
