

Marilyn Owens 3-7-2026

I am no literalist when it comes to scripture. Don't get me wrong... I love the bible, and I don't mean to say that we don't take it seriously. I love its sweeping speculations as to the nature of God. I love its anthropomorphic projections; sometimes, perhaps, tongue in cheek. I love its mythological propositions as to who we are as humans in, shall we say, an ambiguous relationship with our creator. I love that there are radically differing points of view. The Synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, for example, would never claim that Jesus shared the same divinity as God; whereas the writer and editors of John's Gospel make the startling claim that Jesus is of the very Godhead. I love the chutzpah of the legendary figure of Job, challenging the very moral core of the Covenant between God and Israel. The bible is not so much history as it is imaginative musings of theology. The venerable scribes were captured by their poetic sensibilities; they were dreamers.... And we as people of God are invited to dream with them.

But there is one admonition shot through both Hebrew scripture and New Testament literature that I believe we are to take literally. The admonition occurs again and again... and that admonition is to welcome the stranger... welcome one's neighbor; welcome the other; the marginalized, the outcast; love one's enemy. This rubric is not just about moral behavior. It is the very means by which we come to know ourselves, by experiencing the other... and thus, as Plato argued, to know God... to know God in the flesh. Our knowledge of God is not a mere idea, a supernatural fantasy, but such knowledge is borne of the experience of opening ourselves to the other. It is empathy that

is the means of self-knowledge, and spiritual maturity; and I believe empathy, in a world so devoid of it, is the engine of salvation. Jesus says that to love God is to love your neighbor... which is to his mind the whole point of scripture; a premise upon which “hang the Law and the Prophets,” as Jesus puts it.

John’s Gospel is onto this reality. The chief theme of this mystic and elegant gospel is the practice of befriending. The community of John practiced, as did many early Christian communities, the art of collaborative friendship, which was a high ideal in Mediterranean culture; inherited from the Greeks. Friendship in that ancient world required, no less, that one lay down one’s life for the other; that radical sacrifice is the life blood of God’s reign in earth. That is John’s interpretation of the crucifixion: a cardinal act of friendship. Jesus tells his disciples, “I no longer call you slaves. I call you friends.” And where two or three friends gather, God is in their midst. The Quakers got it right. They refer to themselves as a “society of friends” ...that’s who we are as people of faith.

The passage we just read is familiar to us; we hear it often at funerals, but it is not about life in the hereafter. Scripture is decidedly mute on that subject. Rather, Jesus is preaching about the art of befriending; that we, following his example, are to make dwelling places, places of well-being and dignity... sacred space for each other in which we may live the life of God’s kingdom here and now... we are to establish and nurture communities of friendship; communities that engender abundant and meaningful life within a broken world. Such is the vocation of the church.

Our sister Marilyn was a master of the art of friendship. There was nothing she wouldn't do for her people... and if she knew you, you were her people. And she would tell you the truth. Friendship is founded on honesty. I will miss her sage advice, and her sometimes edgy sense of humor. As she was my senior warden for the past two years, we spent hours talking about the life of the church, which she loved... I will treasure her wisdom and her wise council... but mostly I will treasure her friendship. Know well, brothers and sisters, David and Joe, that our grief in God's alchemical grace is Love's means of healing.

So fare forward dear Marilyn, friend forever.... We will remember you always; and our love for you will never die. Fare forward into a life that is changed not ended. Remember us who yet sojourn on our earthly pilgrimage. Pray for us; pray for our befriending; that we may, like you, keep love alive. And may God, in the realm of eternity, grant you at least as much love as you gave to us.