

February 11, 2007
Micah 6:1-8
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
Intergenerational Service
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Friendship and Freedom

I want to begin today by asking you to ponder a question with me. I invite you to think silently for a few moments about this question – “What is a friend?” (*Allow some silence.*) So what thoughts came to your mind. (*Allow time for people’s responses.*)

Today, I’m going to talk about two kinds of friendship and the freedoms that come with those friendships. First, personal friendship – the relationships we have with people we know and care about. Second, the congregational/ corporate friendship we offer in the name of Christ, which often includes people we don’t know and who may be quite different from ourselves.

First, personal friendship. Friends are those who stand by us – in celebration and in sorrow. As most of you know, my father died unexpectedly a week ago. Yesterday, we had a service of celebration for his life at my parents’ home church in Waldoboro. I had not realized ahead of time how many of my friends from high school would be there. My good friend, Dolly, who I first met in the eighth grade, came with her husband all the way from Delaware to be with me and my family. It was also the first time in my life when all my cousins from both sides of the family were all together in the same place. Sometimes family are friends also.

And I am grateful for friends here in this congregation. Thank you for your prayers, your cards, and the presence of all those of you who came to be with my family yesterday in Waldoboro. For me, the power of friendship was palpable yesterday.

I was aware of some of the freedoms that such friendship makes possible. It frees us to be more truly ourselves – *It frees us to do justice – to be more just in our treatment of one another.*

It frees us to greater compassion for one another. *It frees us to love kindness.* And, it frees us to remember we are not alone on this life’s journey. *It frees us to walk humbly with God.*

In that spirit of friendship, I bring you a concern from Jon and Felicity Beede who helped with the scripture reading this morning. They would appreciate your prayers as they await the decision of Philippine officials on whether they may adopt a 7-month-old girl who was “matched” to them by an orphanage social worker. That decision will happen this week. At the same time they want you to know that their children Randy and Fern know nothing about this situation. They are waiting until there is something specific to tell them.

Second, congregational/ corporate friendship.

The story about La Amistad (from 1839) that Marty and Nancy read for us earlier is a very important story in the history of the United Church of Christ.

It is a story full of examples of friendship offered by congregations, and groups within congregations, to those who were being held and treated as slaves. It was a corporate friendship offered to people they didn't know personally. It was friendship offered in the face of public discord and dissent. This was before the Civil War and the country was increasingly in turmoil about slavery.

It is a friendship that made possible freedoms of many kinds. Those who offered the friendship experienced freedom from the tyranny of participating, however passively, in the unjust accepted practice of slavery. And those who received the friendship eventually received the most obvious freedom – they were no longer slaves.

For me, one of the great and tragic ironies about La Amistad is that this ship which was used to transport slaves had a name which translated from Spanish into English means “Friendship.” Doesn't it make your skin crawl to know that some people saw no irony in transporting slaves on a boat named “Friendship?”

After the Mendi people, who were the African people held as slaves aboard the Amistad, revolted, they traveled for days still at sea. Eventually, they were recaptured off the coast of New England and taken to New Haven, Connecticut and imprisoned.

What does the Lord require of us in the face of such a situation?

Some of the Congregationalists in Connecticut formed the Amistad Defense Committee which offered prayers, money, and other resources to help defend the Mendi people, all the way to the Supreme Court.

John Quincy Adams, who had been President of the U.S., and was then serving in the House of Representatives, argued the case before the Supreme Court. The court decided in favor of the Mendi people. This decision is regarded by many as the Court's first civil rights decision.

After the Mendis were freed they had no money to return to Africa. So, they went to Farmington Connecticut where they knew there were other Congregationalists who would help them. In friendship, these forbears of ours welcomed the Mendis into their community and into their church, and helped them raise money to return home.

The original Amistad Defense Committee formed by the Congregationalists later became the American Missionary Association which opened more than 500 schools for slaves freed during the Civil War. This organization and others have become what is now the board for Wider Ministries in the United Church of Christ, which continues our long heritage of justice and peace ministries around the world.

The Amistad was a foundational experience and expression of the UCC commitment to justice ministries – to offering real friendship to those who are in need.

What does God require of us?

To do justice

To love kindness

To walk humbly with our God.

Micah's prophet call is as real and pertinent today as it was in his day and in the day of the Amistad.

I am grateful for the ways this congregation has responded in the past month to the call for justice and kindness in our commitment to build a Habitat House for Diane and Earl Black. In a few moments, in our dedication of today's offering, we will also dedicate our gifts and pledges to the Habitat Build.

Let us keep our eyes and ears open in each new situation as we continue to ask and ponder the question,

What does God require of us?