

[A] lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"¹

There Goes the Neighborhood!

How God Redefines the Boundaries of My Friendships

By Kent A. Hansen

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to this know-it-all lawyer who wanted to split hairs about targets of love. A smug, complacent Seventh-day Adventist lawyer, I find myself questioning Jesus' command to love while seeking to preserve the neighborhood of my daily existence. Jesus does not tolerate my posturing; he constantly stretches the boundaries of my understanding of friendship and mercy.

The following three stories tell what I'm learning from Jesus about friendship.

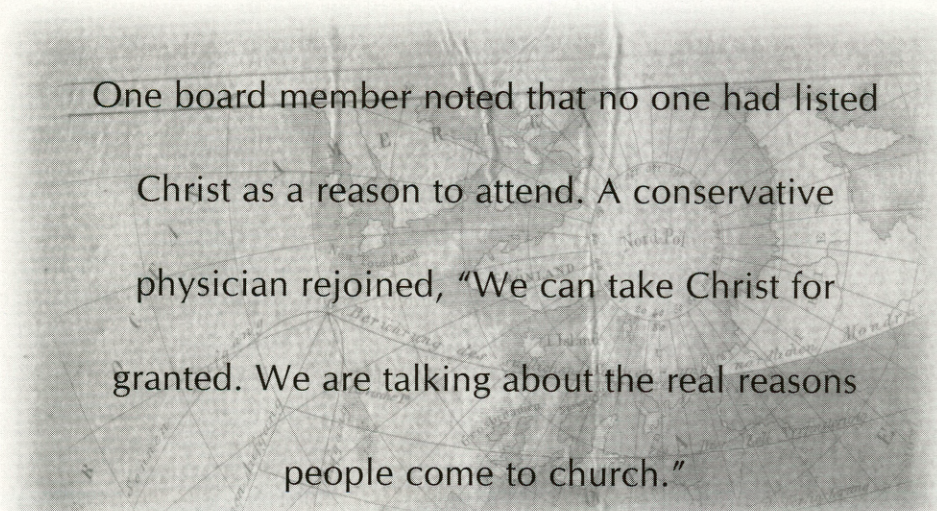
Loving God

Our embattled church board met to consider the qualities desired in a new pastor. The results of a membership survey were revealed on why people chose to attend our congregation. (In southern California, the close proximity of churches gives Adventists a variety of choices about where to attend.)

The number one reason people came to our church was friendship. This was not surprising in our affluent, well-connected suburban congregation. The second-scoring reason was the high quality of our children's Sabbath Schools.

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man had already helped hound our previous pastor out of the congregation with the incessant accusation that he "preached too much love, and not enough Spirit of Prophecy."

"Doc," I said. "Why would we ever take the Savior of the World for granted?"

"You know what I mean," was the terse response.

"I'm afraid I do know, and it's a problem."

"Doc, have you considered that Jesus gave Pilate and Herod an excuse to become friends?² Yet one of them ended up taking his life and the other

self-destructed in worm-eaten egoism. Friendship can't save us. Jesus isn't just some excuse for getting together. If all that is involved in membership in this church is showing up a couple hours each week with my buddies, paying my dues, singing some songs, and listening to a talk, I can join the Rotary Club and save the grief of this place. Besides, where's the friendship in a church as divided as this?"

The interim pastor noisily intervened at this point, chiding me for unorthodox use of Scripture. Three more senior pastors in four years and a weekly drop in attendance to seventy-five out of a total membership of eight hundred finally sobered everyone to the truth that potlucks, flannel boards, and weekly arguments in Sabbath School are no substitute for a relationship with Christ.

Loving My Neighbor

I lunched with my friend, a fundamentalist pastor. He told me about a book that he was reading. He liked it, except for one thing: "I can't understand how someone can write that way about devotion to God and grace, but say that God loves homosexuals."

"Well," I said, "maybe he knows some gays."

"What do you mean?"

"I used to think that homosexuals should be shunned. But I didn't know anyone who claimed to be gay. Then one day an old friend came to see me. We had gone to an Adventist college together and kept in

touch afterward. I was one of the first to know of her engagement and had attended her wedding as an honored guest.

"We made some small talk and then she said: 'I hear that there have been some big changes in your life.'

"Yes, I had an encounter with Jesus that changed everything for me.'

"I went on to describe an experience of intense spiritual renewal and the impact that it was having on my life and the lives of some mutual friends.

"I'm glad somebody I know is getting their life together,' she said. Then she told me abruptly, 'I've taken a lover.'

"My eyes must have widened. 'Really?' I said.

"There was a pause, then the other shoe dropped: 'My lover is a woman.'

"Oh,' I said.

"We kind of tiptoed through the conversation after that."

My pastor friend laid down his sandwich and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "I can only imagine how you must have felt," he said.

"Well," I continued, "we talked about her estrangement from her husband and whether their marriage had a chance.

"Finally, I told her what was on my heart. 'If God can say one thing to you in this moment, it is that he loves you and wants you to think.'

"I don't want to think right now,' she said.

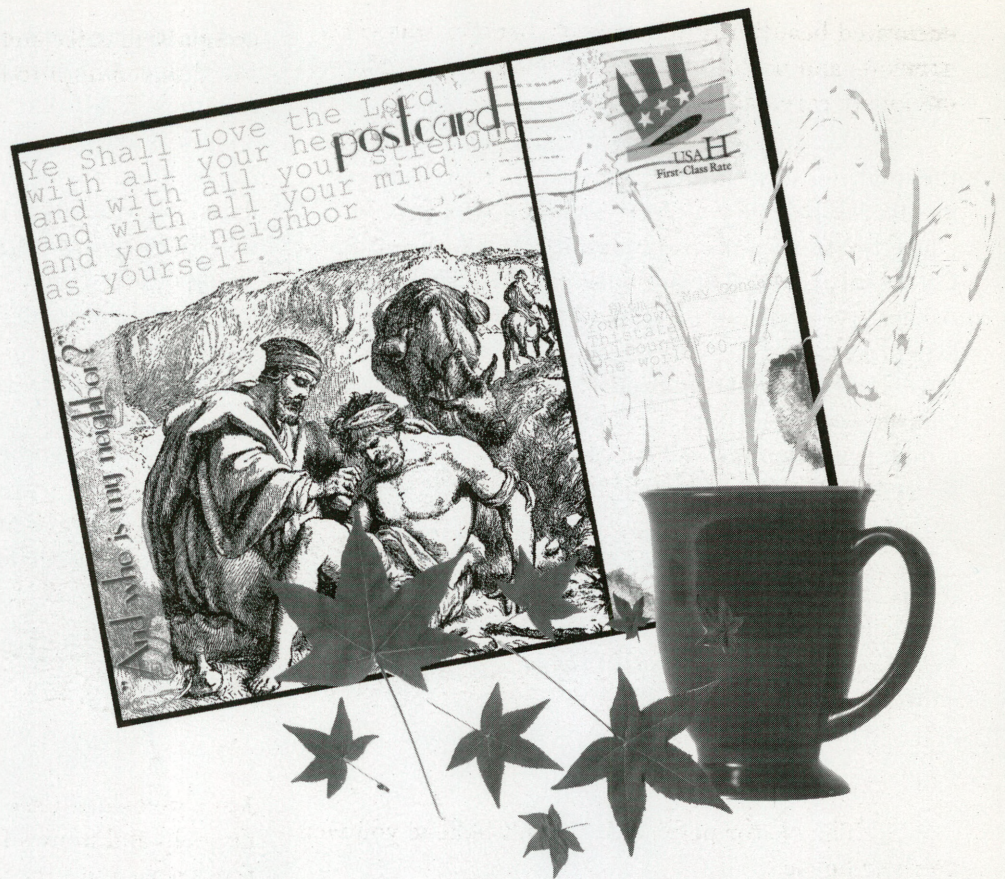
"I know, but God wants us to think about what we are doing and why."

"So what happened?" the pastor asked.

"We wrote to each other after that. We exchanged frank views regarding the rights and wrongs of her situation. She realizes that I don't approve of the breakup of her marriage and her new relationship, yet she knows I care deeply about her as a person and friend. I also maintain a good friendship with her former spouse.

"I invited her back to church when I preached, and she came. She was obviously uncomfortable, but thought enough of me to listen as I spoke about a complete commitment to Christ.

"Later, she and her domestic partner needed legal assistance concerning their property. She asked me to represent them. 'Now this is where the rubber hits the road,' I thought, 'What am I going to do?' All other friendships from her Adventist days were gone. Outside her family, I was her only remaining contact to that life. Would I enable sin if I helped her and her domestic partner? If I cut her off, what



would be the gain to God or to her?

"These were really tough questions because I believe that sexual purity is an essential principle. I accept traditional Adventist teachings on adultery, fornication, the sanctity of marriage, and the need for celibacy outside of marriage. In my representation of church institutions, I have been called many times to provide legal enforcement of these principles in the discipline and termination of employees. She knows what I believe and why. What she doesn't know is how much I prayed about what to do.

"I was impressed to go forward. I offered to take her and her partner to lunch to discuss their legal problem. Instead, she invited me to lunch at their home, and I agreed."

"You mean you condoned her sin," said the pastor, unable to contain his distaste.

"I don't see it that way. She was my friend long before she admitted her new relationship to me. I love her. What chance does love have without contact and communication? Isn't that what Jesus' incarnation is about? If there is contact there can be evangelism. Also, legal ethics are involved. It's wrong for me to refuse representation just because I disapprove of a client's sexual orientation.

"The lunch was pleasant and the home

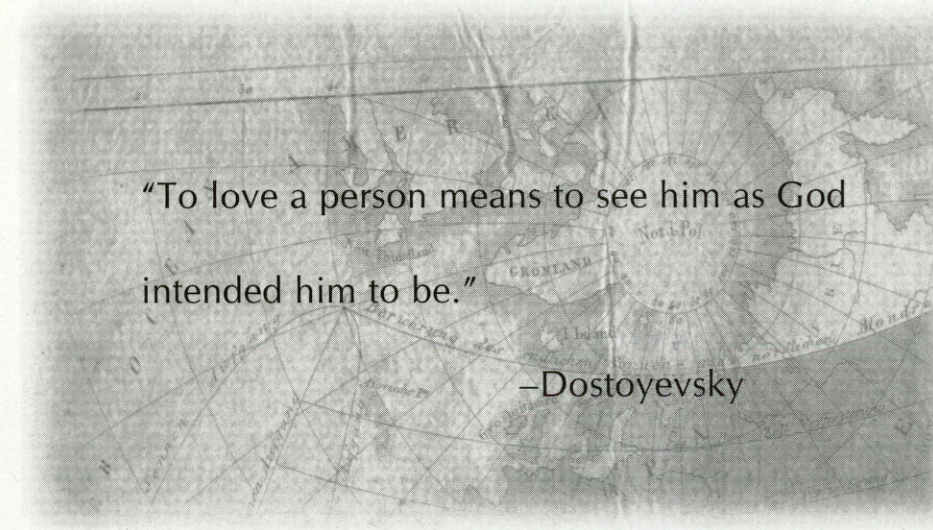
decorated beautifully. My friend's partner was very gracious and both were friendly and relaxed. They obviously cared about each other."

compulsive eater and verbal abuser are those who loved me enough to look at and touch me, not

flinching at my nature. The ones who turned away in disgust left me in despair and self-hatred. Knowing that, I can't turn away from my friend.

Dostoyevsky observed, "To love a person means to see him as God intended him to be." Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."⁵ There are four Gospels, four sets of God-given eyes that saw the people whom Jesus came to save from four different perspectives. With the eyes

Jesus gives me, I see a friend God loves, who needs my help and knows I serve Jesus. Who am I to shut these eyes and turn away, wishing instead for God to bring me a person who thinks and acts just like me?



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—Dostoyevsky

The pastor persisted: "I can't believe you went to their house."

"Well, I kind of surprised me. But I'm glad I went and I would go again."

"I could never and would never do that," the pastor said. Persons in known sin should be excluded from fellowship until they repent and return to God."

"The God we know," I replied, "is a God of mercy. I simply cannot get around what James wrote: 'Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.'³ If Christ is my life, if Christ means anything to me, then who am I to deny contact to a person who seeks me out in friendship?"

In politeness, we agreed to disagree. The lunch ended; we were both troubled. My mind continues to change about how the gospel should be applied in relationships.

Sometimes I long for the return of days before I felt the grip of Jesus on my soul. I was much more comfortable and certain then about the application of rules to life and friendship.

What do I think at this point? I think that my friend's lifestyle is not God's ideal, but neither are my compulsive behavior and angry speech—both equally noted as barriers to inheritance of the Kingdom.⁴ The persons who have brought me to conviction as a

Loving Myself

The story is often told of a man who made an appointment with the famous psychologist Carl Jung to get help for chronic depression. Jung told him to reduce his fourteen-hour work day to eight, go directly home, and spend the evenings in his study, quiet and all alone. The depressed man went home to his study each night, shut the door, read a little Herman Hesse or Thomas Mann, played a few Chopin etudes or some Mozart. After weeks of this he returned to Jung complaining that he could see no improvement. On learning how the man had spent his time, Jung said, "But you didn't understand. I didn't want you to be with Hesse or Mann or Chopin or Mozart. I wanted you to be completely alone." The man looked terrified and exclaimed, "I can't think of any worse company." Jung replied, "Yet this is the self you inflict on other people fourteen

hours a day" (and, Jung might have added, the self you inflict on yourself.)⁶

This story explains why I sat on an eighty-seven-hundred-foot peak in Arizona's White Mountains at 6:30 a.m., on July 30, 1994, reading Psalm 119. I could no longer live with the self that I was inflicting on others and on me. I had learned in childhood to question whether I was really loved and, to avoid the pain of discovery, I learned to keep those closest to me at bay, routinely using an emotional flamethrower to clear space around me and readjust my boundaries. Anger, however, is a weapon without discernment between enemies and friends. It seared persons in my life deeply committed to me no matter what happens—people like my spouse, child, and law partners.

My rages broke relationships that I valued. Persons who loved me and whom I loved came to fear me and distrust my responses. This, I discovered, was the very cycle through which I had learned my destructive behavior.

Christ seized my life and stubbornly refused to coexist with my murderous heart of anger. The fact that I was reacting to childhood wounds explained matters, but was no excuse. Writing about the preeminence of love in Christ's followers, Paul explained: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways."⁷ When people depend on you to take care of them, you must forgo the luxury of childish indulgence at their expense and pain.

In the summer of 1994, I was referred to a couple of clients who told me, "They say that win or lose, you always take a pound of flesh." That comment devastated me. My sin was my business card and it was past time to change. But how could I alter my very nature?

Unfit for companionship, I retreated into the Arizona wilderness for two weeks. I hiked into the woods every morning before dawn and spent the day praying for God to change me. The Holy Spirit strongly impressed me to pray while reading Psalm 119. That surprised me because I knew the passage only as the longest chapter in the Bible and an exposition of the glories of God's law.

On the sixth morning, I found my way cross-country to a rocky promontory that rose out of an aspen grove in the valley below. There I sat and prayed, reading these words: "May your unfailing love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to

your promise; then I will answer the one who taunts me, for I trust in your word."⁸ These words were a revelation. God loves me and will not stop! This truth moved from my head into my heart. Assured that the Creator and Lord of the Universe finds me loveable, I could confront the one who taunts me: myself. In that moment, a door opened and I walked through to free space where I could begin loving my neighbor and myself—as I am loved. In the words of an old children's chorus about John 3:16, "Whosoever surely meaneth me."

The simple fact of a life possessed by a faithful Christ is that it does not need to force issues and people to compensate for a perceived lack of love. Jesus tells me, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."⁹ Accepting this promise changed everything for me. I am my own friend.

A year after that Arizona morning, I was driving with my spouse, Patricia. I told her in amazed relief, "I'm not mad anymore. I don't know when or exactly how it happened, but the rage has gone out of me like a forest fire must die in the rain—slowly and gently, with steaming hisses and flare-ups—but it goes out."

Jesus' point to the lawyer was that the neighbor is the one who shows indiscriminate kindness. I am learning that the person who needs my kindness is a friend with whose choices I disagree, my own self-contemptuous soul, and even Jesus himself when taken for granted and shunted aside in his own house.

Notes and References

1. Luke 10:25-29 (NRSV).
2. Luke 23:6-12.
3. James 1:12-13 (NIV).
4. 1 Cor. 6:10.
5. John 9:39 (NIV). Dostoyevsky is quoted in Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons and Parables of Jesus*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 81.
6. Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 19-20.
7. 1 Cor. 13:11 (NRSV).
8. Ps. 119:41-42 (NIV).
9. John 14:18 (NRSV).

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