Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John

GAIL R. O'DAY
Professor of New Testament
Candler School of Theology

In popular image, Jesus as friend is sentimentalized, but not so in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus gave his life in love for others and always spoke and acted boldly—marks of friendship in the cultural world of the New Testament.

"Hannah is my best friend," says my seven-year-old neighbor about the eight-year-old girl who lives two doors down from her. I do not know how Solveig would define friendship. But I do know that Solveig expresses her friendship when she walks to school with Hannah, takes a special trip to the town library with her, and plays with her at least one weekend day. Their friendship is apparent when Hannah and Solveig fall into each other's arms almost every time they see one another.

Yet this friendship is much more than a sweet diversion or something about which the adults in their lives can wax sentimental. The formation of friendship bonds is among the first acts of socialization that a child makes outside the nuclear family. We choose our friends in ways that we do not and cannot choose our families. The ability and inclination to establish friendship bonds is therefore key to the formation of a social network later in life. Friendship moves a person from being a private individual to a member of a social group based on something beyond kinship. The popular television show "Friends" characterizes this social reality. Despite the absurdities of its plots and the economic ease with which its protagonists live in New York City, the show has created a world in which community is defined and built by the bonds of friendship, not family.

Friendship, then, is not simply about affection but also about social roles and responsibilities. Friendship is not defined exclusively by what the individual "feels" for another (although affection is definitely a part of friendship). Friendship is at least as much about the social responsibilities that accompany friendship as it is about how people choose their friends. Say, for example, on the morning of Hannah's birthday party, Solveig announces, "I

don't want to go to Hannah's party. I don't like her—she wasn't nice to me yesterday." Solveig's mother then explains to her that she has to go to the party because she and Hannah are friends, regardless of Solveig's feelings of the moment. Acts of friendship must transcend the volatility of emotions. Even as seven and eight year olds, Hannah and Solveig learn about social expectations and obligations through their friendship and also learn how to put their feelings for one another (affection) into practice.

This combination of affection, social choice and obligation, and practice has made friendship a perennially intriguing topic as well as an important category of theological reflection, especially among feminist theologians who are drawn to the patterns of reciprocity found in friendship.[1] God as friend and the Christian community as a community of friends are important themes that emerge. Friendship as a social and theological motif has been given considerable attention by New Testament scholars in recent years as well because it is a motif that the New Testament shares with the Greek and Roman cultures in which the early church took shape and the New Testament documents were written.[2] Friendship was an especially popular topic in ancient Greece and Rome, as philosophers and storytellers attempted to define the social and moral virtues and the characteristics of a good society. When the New Testament speaks about friends (Greek, *philoi*), it is using a vocabulary current in its cultural context.

FRIENDSHIP IN GREEK AND ROMAN ANTIQUITY

Even though there is a consistency of vocabulary across the centuries used to discuss friendship in antiquity, there is no consistency of emphasis or definition.[3] Friendship is a socially embedded phenomenon, and as the social fabric of a culture shifts, so does the understanding of the role and place of friendship in society. Each ancient writer, including the New Testament writers, developed the friendship traditions in different ways depending on his or her own community setting. The New Testament writers (and later Christians) helped shape the discussion of friendship in antiquity; they were not simply dependent on following its conventions.[4]

The social dimension of friendship has long been recognized by ancient writers, especially philosophers. The particular context in which that social dimension was enacted

---

[1]See, e.g., S. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); E. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); C. M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1991); E. Moltmann-Wendel, *Rediscovering Friendship*, tr. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 2000).

[2]See, e.g., the two collections of essays edited by J. T. Fitzgerald, *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, SBLRBS 34 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); and *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech*, NovTSup 82 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

[3]For a discussion of the range of meaning of *philos*, see D. Konstan, "Greek Friendship," *AJP* 117 (1996) 71–94.

[4]A. C. Mitchell, "'Greet the Friends by Name': New Testament Evidence for the Greco-Roman Topos on Friendship," in *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, 225–62, esp. 261–62. See D. Konstan, "Problems in the History of Christan Friendship," *JECS* 4 (1996) 87–113, for the contributions of later Christian writers to the concept of friendship in antiquity.

shifted, depending on the particular moment in history. For classical Greek philosophers in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., for example, most notably Aristotle, "friend" or *philos* played a pivotal social role in the maintenance of the polis, the city–state. Aristotle devoted two out of ten books in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship (Books 8 and 9), a considerable portion of this treatise. For Aristotle and the classical philosophers who followed him, friendship was not an incidental relationship. It exemplified, rather, the mutual social obligation on which the polis depended.[5] In the democratic ideal of the Athenian polis, the relationship between friends, *philoi*, was a relationship between equals contributing together to the public ethos of citizenship. To be a good friend was by definition also to be a good citizen.[6] To the philosophers, the success of the Athenian democracy depended on the enactment of friendship and the related virtues of courage and justice by its citizenry.[7]

The following quote from Aristotle illustrates this well:

> But it is also true the virtuous man's conduct is often guided by the interests of his friends and of his country, and that he will if necessary lay down his life in their behalf. . . . And this is doubtless the case with those who give their lives for others; thus they choose great nobility for themselves.[8]

The ideal city–state, represented by Athens, vanished after Philip of Macedon's conquest of Greece in 338 B.C.E. and the empire-building of Alexander the Great that followed. With its much more diverse and complex population, Hellenism and the Hellenistic empire replaced the democratic ideal of the Athenian city–state as the social context for friendship. This shift continued when Rome overthrew the Hellenistic empire in the second century B.C.E. and established the Roman empire in 31 B.C.E. As the political and social landscape shifted, so also did philosophical reflections on the meaning and value of friendship.

Friendship remained a social virtue and moral value but was enacted in a different arena. For example, friendship was no longer viewed primarily through the lens of democratic citizenship. The classical perspectives remained touchstones for later philosophers, but Hellenistic philosophers took their reflections in new directions. In the Hellenistic period, the classical ideal of friendship met the realities of political pragmatism, and philosophical discussions of friendship reflected both realities.

In particular, a new sphere of friendship, patron–client relationships, entered the public arena. In the classical period, a false friend was one who was not available in a time of crisis,

---

[5]F. M. Schroeder, "Friendship in Aristotle and Some Peripatetic Philosophers," in *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, 36.

[6]Konstan, "History of Christian Friendship," 90.

[7]See, e.g., M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Schroeder, "Friendship in Aristotle"; L. S. Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Athens was a small slice of the ancient world, even the Greek world, and the other city-states did not share the Athenians' enthusiasm for democracy. Sparta, for example, was more of a military state, whose military defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.E.).

[8]*Eth. nic.* 9.8.9 [LCL translation].

but Hellenistic discussions of false friends began to focus on those who have only their own betterment in view.[9] Among Roman philosophers such as Plutarch and Cicero, friendship concerned not only what it meant to be a friend but how to distinguish between a true friend and its opposite, the flatterer (*kolax*).[10] As Plutarch wrote:

> [T]he friend is always found on the better side as counsel and advocate, trying, after the manner of a physician, to foster the growth of what is sound and to preserve it; but the flatterer takes his place on the side of the emotional and irrational.[11]

Philosophers advised the patron on how to recognize social contacts who were not friends—those who had not the patron's interests at heart but their own. One of the distinguishing marks was the use of "frank speech" (*parrēsia*). "Frankness of speech, by common report and belief, is the language of friendship especially (as an animal has its peculiar cry), and on the other hand, that lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble . . . ."[12] Friendship was at least as much about one's private dealings as it was about public obligations.

Another Hellenistic social context in which discussions of friendship played a pivotal role was the philosophical school. In many ways, these schools reclaimed the classical ideal of a community of equals from the more pragmatic realities of patron–client relationships and the political expediency of "friends of the emperor."[13] This is clearly the case with the Neopythagoreans, who shaped themselves around the values of harmony and friendship first articulated by Pythagorus of Samos in the sixth century B.C.E.[14] The philosophical schools of the Epicureans and Stoics also gave a prominent role to friendship in their reflections on the meaning of the good life, the proper education and conduct of the good person, and the nature of community life.[15] The language of friendship provided language for talking about the construction of a community of like-minded people informed by a particular set of teachings.

In the teachings about laying down one's life for a friend, the gospel's first readers would recognize that Jesus is evoking a world in which the greatest moral good prevails.

[9]D. Konstan, "Friendship, Frankness and Flattery," in *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech*, 8–12.

[10]See, e.g., Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* (*Adul. Amic.*); Cicero, *On Friendship* (*Laelius; de amicitia*).

[11]Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 61.

[12]Ibid., 51.

[13]See the use of this expression in John 19:12.

[14]See Pythagorean sayings collections, e.g., H. Chadwick, *The Sentences of Sextus: A Contribution to the History of Early Christian Ethics*, Texts and Studies n.s. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); and J. C. Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses: With Introduction and Commentary*, *Religion in the Greco-Roman World* 123 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), and biographical traditions, *Iamblichus: On the Pythagorean Way of Life*, SBLTT 29 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

[15]For a careful discussion of one Stoic perspective on friendship, see C. E. Glad, "Frank Speech, Flattery, and Friendship in Philodemus," in *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech*, 21–60.

Early Christian understandings of friendship took shape in this diverse social context with its intentional reflection on friendship. Many different motifs from the Hellenistic conversations can be detected in the New Testament writings. For example, a well-known friendship maxim, attributed to Pythagorus and the Neopythagoreans, was that friends had all things in common.[16] Since Luke portrays the early Christian community in Acts as living out this value (e.g., Acts 2:44–47), this maxim provides a starting point for a discussion of friendship and community in Acts.[17] But not all New Testament writers are drawn to the same motifs. The Johannine discussion of friendship, for example, does not follow the Pythagorean maxim.

FRIENDSHIP IN JOHN

The Gospel of John is a pivotal text for the discussion of friendship in the New Testament. The vocabulary of friendship, especially the noun *philos* and the related verb *phileō*, is found at key moments in the narrative.[18] As we will see below, friendship is one of the ways in which the revelation of God in Jesus is extended beyond the work of Jesus to the work of the disciples. One of the pivotal texts in Jesus' words of instruction and farewell to his disciples is John 15:12–17, in which Jesus calls the disciples "friends" and enjoins them to acts of friendship.

The word "friend" in John carried many associations for John's first readers. Modern readers cannot completely recapture those associations, but they can at least recognize that John did not create the theme of friendship out of whole cloth.[19] Awareness of cultural embeddedness helps modern readers see that friendship is not a universal term for all times and cultures. Most contemporary friendship greeting cards, for example, adorned with roses, kittens, and butterflies, do not exhort the card's recipient to "lay down one's life for a friend." Jesus' words in John 15:13 seem unprecedented for a modern friend. As the above quotation from Aristotle shows, however, Jesus' saying has precedent as a model for the ultimate friend in antiquity. The point is not that more people laid down their lives for their friends in the first century than are inclined to do so today. Rather, the possibility of doing so belonged to the ancient rhetoric of friendship.

The echoes of Greco-Roman friendship motifs in John may be found among the attributes and virtues associated with friendship in the Hellenistic world, as well as the spe-

---

[16] "Again, the proverb says, 'Friends' goods are common property,' and this is correct, since community is the essence of friendship" (*Eth. nic.* 8.9.2).

[17] See A. C. Mitchell, "The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–47," *JBL* 111 (1992) 255–72.

[18] See three recent book-length studies of friendship in John: E. Puthenkandathil, *Philos: A Designation for the Jesus-Disciple Relationship. An Exegetico-Theological Investigation of the Term in the Fourth Gospel* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993); J. M. Ford, *Redeemer–Friend and Mother: Salvation in Antiquity and in the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); S. Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

[19] Of the three recent books on friendship and John cited above, Ford and Ringe are attentive to the first-century social and rhetorical context.

cific vocabulary of "friend" (*philos* and related terms). In the New Testament period, for example, the distinction between the friend who employs frank speech (*parrēsia*) and the flatterer (*kolax*) was prominent in discussions of friendship. While the word *kolax* does not occur in John, its opposite, frankness or boldness (*parrēsia*, 7:4, 13, 26; 10:24; 11:14, 54: 16:25, 29; 18:20), suggests a possible connection with these friendship conventions.

One can also look for gospel stories where friendship and its values are enacted. In the philosophical treatises on friendship, the virtues of friendship were often illustrated by reference to traditional pairs of friends (e.g., Achilles and Patroclus). Friendship is not simply an abstract social and moral virtue; it achieves its real worth when it is modeled and embodied in practice. In addition, Hellenistic narratives often recounted tales of friends and acts of friendship.[20] The most well-known of these may have been Lucian's *Toxaris*, in which two men tell each other competing stories about the practice of friendship to demonstrate the superiority of the people of their respective nations.[21]

Our study of John will begin with the character of Jesus and look for the vocabulary and attributes of friendship as well as stories in which Jesus embodies friendship. From there, we can consider whether Jesus as friend in John has implications for contemporary theology.

Two friendship motifs from the Greco–Roman world provide a promising framework for regarding Jesus as friend in John: Jesus' love for others that is embodied in his death and Jesus' boldness in speech and action.

FRIENDSHIP, LOVE, AND DEATH

The first motif, the offer of Jesus' life, receives the most attention in Johannine studies of friendship.[22] It is widely recognized among Johannine scholars that the notion of laying down one's life for one's friends represents a classical motif of friendship.[23] Plato's *Symposium* is cited as evidence of this aspect of friendship in antiquity ("Only those who love wish to die for others").[24] Interestingly, it is not clear that this connection between friendship, love, and death in antiquity has had much influence on the way Christian theology and piety interpret the death of Jesus in John. Perhaps it is feared that any resonance somehow diminishes the significance of Jesus' teaching about his own death or routinizes

[20]See R. F. Hock, "An Extraordinary Friend in Chariton's Callirhoe: The Importance of Friendship in the Greek Romances," in *Greco–Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, 145–162.

[21]Even if, as R. Pervo suggests ("With Lucian: Who Needs Friends? Friendship in the *Toxaris*," in *Greco–Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, 163–80), Lucian intended this work as a parody of the friendship tales of romances, the friendship *topoi* embodied by these stories had to have been widely recognized for the parody to be effective.

[22]E.g., both Ringe, *Wisdom's Friends*, and Ford, *Redeemer–Friend and Mother*, discuss this motif and its relationship to the love commandment (13:33–35 and 15:12), but neither even alludes to the motif of boldness.

[23]E.g., R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI*, AB 29A (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970) 664.

[24]*Symp.* 179B, also 208D. See also Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 9.8.9; Lucian, *Toxaris* 36; Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.7.3; and Seneca, *Ep.* 9.10. In the New Testament, see Rom 5:6–8.

the death itself.[25]

In fact, the opposite is more likely the case—the connection with a well-known convention enhances John's presentation of Jesus. For the first readers of John's gospel, the link with friendship motifs helped lay the groundwork for what John was teaching about Jesus' death. Since both classical and popular philosophy held up the noble death as the ultimate act of friendship,[26] Jesus' teaching in John fits a recognizable pattern. Jesus' words in John 15:13, for example, could be a friendship maxim from any philosophical treatise on friendship, as there is nothing distinctly Christological in their formulation: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." In the teachings about laying down one's life for a friend, the gospel's first readers would recognize that Jesus is evoking a world in which the greatest moral good prevails.

What distinguishes John 15:13 from other teachings on friendship and death is that Jesus does not merely talk about laying down his life for his friends. His life is an incarnation of this teaching. Jesus did what the philosophers only talked about—he lay down his life for his friends. This makes all the difference in appropriating friendship as a theological category. The pattern of Jesus' own life and death moves the teaching of John 15:13 from the realm of abstraction to an embodied promise and gift.

John 10:11–18 illustrates well the transition from maxim to promise. In these verses (a central section of the Good Shepherd discourse), Jesus combines figurative and discursive language to evoke the type of friendship he offers the community. In 10:11a, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," but he immediately moves away from first-person language to describe more generalized activities of the shepherd. The good shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep" (v.11b), as opposed to the hireling who would put the sheep at risk rather than risk his own life (vv. 12–13). This mini-parable could be taken as an illustration of the classical distinction between the true and the false friend—the false friend will not be around in a time of crisis, but the true friend will be.[27]

The move from maxim to promise in Jesus' teaching is signaled by his return to first-person language ("I lay down my life for the sheep," v. 15) and to direct speech about his own life and death: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord" (vv. 17–18a). The first-person language clarifies that Jesus is not speaking generally about the gift of one's life for others but making a specific promise about his own life. Jesus has

---

[25]It is also the case that the distinctive soteriology of the Gospel of John is often subsumed under the models of vicarious suffering or Jesus' death as a ransom for sins. John does not subscribe to either of those dominant understandings, but those perspectives so dominate most Christian theology and piety that the Johannine voice is not heard. See G. R. O'Day, *John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, NIB 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 713–15.

[26]For an excellent discussion of "noble death" and its connections to John, see J. Neyrey, "The 'Noble Shepherd' in John 10: Cultural and Rhetorical Background," *JBL* 120 (2001) 267–91. Oddly, Neyrey never explicitly links the noble death motif with the motif of friendship, even though both John and Greco-Roman philosophers do.

[27]E.g., Lucian, *Toxaris* 36 ("Just so in calm weather a man cannot tell whether his sailing master is good; he will need a storm to determine that.").

already pointed figuratively toward his death earlier in the gospel narrative (e.g., 3:14; 8:28). New here is his direct speech about his death and the element of volition he highlights. Jesus announces that he will choose to give his life for the sheep. His words are no longer generalized teachings about friendship; they are about the conduct of his own life.

The stories of Jesus' arrest and death show that his promises about the gift of his life can be trusted. The scene of the arrest in the garden contains interesting echoes of John 10 when Jesus leads his disciples into an enclosed garden, recalling the shepherd and the sheepfold of John 10:1–5. There is a thief in the garden (Judas, 18:2; described as *kleptēs* in 12:7), like the bandit in the sheepfold (*kleptēs*, 10:1). Against this backdrop, Jesus' act of volition, in which he steps forward to meet those who come to arrest him (18:4–6),[28] can only be read as showing the truth of his announcement and promise in 10:17–18: he lays down his life of his own accord. At 18:11, Jesus states explicitly that he chooses the death that is before him ("the cup that the Father has given me"; cf. 12:27). Jesus' life is not taken from him; rather, he willingly chooses the ultimate act of friendship. Jesus also directly links the offer of his life to his care for his "sheep" (cf. 10:11–13) with the protective instruction to "let these men go."[29]

Jesus does not merely talk the language of friendship; he lives out his life and death as a friend.

Jesus' free offer of his life for his friends is also illustrated in the quiet dignity of his death scene (19:28–30). Jesus announces the end of his own life and work: "It is finished." The description of Jesus' moment of dying positions him as the actor in laying down his life, not as one acted upon: "Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

The arrest and crucifixion narratives confirm that Jesus' words about laying down his life for others articulate much more than the ideal situation. In the life and death of Jesus, the friendship convention of loving another enough to give one's life moves from philosophical or moral possibility to incarnated actuality. Jesus' words about laying down his life articulate the very real choices that he makes for his own life and that guide his relationships in the world. What was familiar to at least some of John's readers as a standard part of philosophical rhetoric loses its conventional quality and becomes a distinctive description of who Jesus is. Jesus does not merely talk the language of friendship; he lives out his life and death as a friend.

Equally important, the convergence of Jesus' words with his actions shows that his words and promises can be trusted. There is complete unanimity between what Jesus says

---

[28]Jesus does not wait for Judas to identify him with a kiss in John, thereby robbing the "thief" of any access to the shepherd and his flock.

[29]Neyrey, "Noble Shepherd," 291.

about laying down his life and what Jesus does. Because Jesus is the Word-made-flesh, speech and action are inextricably linked in John (e.g., 14:10). What he receives from God Jesus speaks in God's words and does in works (5:19–24; 10:38; 12:49–50; 17:7–8). Jesus' teaching about laying down one's life in John 10 is a reliable promise because his subsequent enactment of these words shows that Jesus' promises can be trusted.

The reliability of Jesus' promises and the integration of his speaking and acting set the context for his teachings about the disciple's own conduct as friends in John 15:12–17. Jesus' own life and death give the teaching of John 15:13 its meaning. The maxim of 15:13 is inseparable from the commandment that precedes it, "Love one another as I have loved you." The Fourth Evangelist has told the reader that Jesus loved his own "to the end" (*eis to telos*, 13:1), which may simultaneously mean "to the end of time" and "to the full extent of love." Both senses carry over into Jesus' commandment to his disciples. Jesus' incarnation of limitless love moves the teaching of John 15:13 from the realm of the general (e.g., "Only those who love wish to die for others") into the specific. Jesus' disciples are urged to live the same way Jesus has lived, to be the kind of friend that Jesus has been. He is not simply asking them to be good citizens or moral exemplars. He is commanding them to embody the very promises that he has embodied for them (15:14, 17).

Interestingly, the title "friend" is never used to describe Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. Throughout this gospel, Jesus has been the incarnation of friendship without the explicit appellation. However, in speaking of his disciples' future lives, Jesus makes the explicit connection between his life of love and the conduct of friends. Jesus calls the disciples his "friends" (*philoi*), if they enact his commandment (15:14)—to love one another as Jesus has loved them (v. 12), to lay down their lives for their friends (v. 13). Jesus' gift of his life for others embodies friendship's highest attribute and defines the meaning and extent of "love."

The title "friend" becomes something into which Jesus invites his disciples to grow. The name "friend," and with it the relationship of friendship, is a gift from Jesus to them,[30] just as his life is a gift to them. The disciples begin with the explicit appellation, "friend," and the challenge for them is to enact and embody friendship as Jesus has done. The disciples know how Jesus has been a friend, and they are called to see what kind of friends they can become. Jesus' friendship is the model of friendship for the disciples, and it makes any subsequent acts of friendship by them possible because the disciples themselves are already the recipients of Jesus' acts of friendship.

FRIENDSHIP AS BOLDNESS OF SPEECH AND ACTION

As noted above, the theme of frankness or boldness of speech (*parrēsia*) emerged as an

[30]So R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 3 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3.110. See also the language of election in 15:16, "You did not choose me but I chose you."

important friendship motif in the Hellenistic period.[31] There were several social contexts in which this theme appeared. One was the patron–client/monarch–subject relationship, in which the benefactor needed to be on the lookout for whether "friends" were speaking honestly and openly, or whether they were engaging in flattery to further their own ends. Another context where *parrēsia* played a role was in the instruction of the philosophical schools, where frank speech was encouraged as a mark of honest instruction, dialogue, and training. To be someone's friend was to speak frankly and honestly to them and to hold nothing back. A third context, also associated with philosophical schools, used *parrēsia* to emphasize freedom of speech, even when using that freedom meant taking unpopular positions and speaking openly against the authorities.[32]

Perhaps because this friendship motif does not have the same emotional resonance associated with language about love and laying down one's life, most studies of friendship in John have not lingered on this topic.[33] Given the importance of speech and speaking in the Gospel of John, however, a friendship motif that focuses on the nature of speaking seems worthy of study. Indeed, the word *parrēsia* occurs nine times in the Gospel of John, more often than in any other book of the New Testament (7:4, 13, 26; 10:24; 11:14, 54; 16:25, 29; 18:20).

The first aspect of *parrēsia*, the distinction between flattery and direct speech, is not overt in the Johannine portrait of Jesus as friend. One wonders, however, if there are some resonances of this aspect. The preceding discussion about death, love, and friendship showed how Jesus gave his life openly for others, with no hesitation. Jesus' free gift of his life provides the context for Jesus' words in 12:27 ("And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."). These words seem to be a play on the "agony" of the Gethsemane tradition from the synoptic gospels (e.g., Matt 26:39), in which Jesus asks that the cup pass from him, if that is God's will. John 12:27 acknowledges this piece of Jesus tradition, but transforms it to conform to the gospel's understanding of the death of Jesus.

Yet there may be another reason why John handles the Gethsemane tradition the way he does. The words of the synoptic tradition (e.g, "yet not what I want but what you want," Matt 26:39) could be understood as an attempt to curry favor with a "patron." In John, God and Jesus are true friends ("The Father loves [*philei*] the Son," 5:20); their relationship embodies full reciprocity and mutuality ("The Father and I are one," 10:30). The revisioning of the Gethsemane tradition makes clear that Jesus does not attempt to flatter God for his own purposes but seeks only God's glory.

---

[31]See the collection of essays, *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech.*

[32]See the essay by W. Klassen, "PARRĒSIA in the Johannine Corpus," in *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech*, 227–54. This essay, while solidly grounded in the Hellenistic context, does not provide a very subtle reading of the Johannine material.

[33]See n. 22 above. Klassen's essay studies *parrēsia* but does not link it with friendship. Schnackenburg, *St. John*, 3.111, alludes to the connection between *parrēsia* and friendship in John 15 (see discussion below) but does not develop it.

A similar link to the flattery/direct speech contrast also may provide a context for Jesus' words in 11:41–42. ("Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.") This statement by Jesus prior to calling Lazarus from the tomb has always puzzled commentators because the words seem to interrupt the movement of the story and raise questions about the function of Jesus' prayer.[34] Read in light of friendship conventions, however, it is possible that John includes Jesus' commentary on his own prayer here in order to highlight that Jesus is not currying favor with God at this critical moment. He is not attempting to please God with a prayer and positive words. Rather, Jesus turns what could appear as flattery into an instance of open testimony, so that the crowd can see God at work in what Jesus does.

The second motif of *parrēsia* as a direct and open speech plays a more explicit role in the image of Jesus as friend in John. Of the nine occurrences of *parrēsia* in John, three refer to his instruction of the disciples (11:14; 16:25, 29). The first, 11:14, seems relatively straightforward and, as such, its potential significance for understanding friendship is overlooked. Jesus tells his disciples that "our friend (*ho philos hēmōn*) Lazarus has fallen asleep (*kekoimetai*)" (11:11). "To fall asleep," in Greek as in English, can function as a euphemism for death. Jesus' disciples do not recognize Jesus' words as a euphemism, and so do not understand why Jesus should put himself at risk by returning to Judea if Lazarus is only sleeping (v. 12). The narrator explains the euphemism to the gospel's readers by drawing attention to the disciples' lack of understanding (v. 13). Jesus explains to his disciples what he meant and explicitly names Lazarus's death (11:14). The narrator describes the speech act by which Jesus informs the disciples about the truth of Lazarus's situation as speaking *parrēsia* ("then Jesus told them plainly").

Perhaps this "plain speech" is only the decoding of a figurative expression with a literal one. Two aspects of the text argue against assigning this function to *parrēsia*, however. First, Jesus uses a conventional euphemism ("fall asleep"), so it is not even clear that he was trying to mask his meaning. Second, unlike other sections of the Fourth Gospel where misunderstanding, irony, and metaphor are literary devices intended to move characters to deeper theological understanding (e.g., John 4),[35] the misunderstanding here is corrected immediately.

The role of *parrēsia* in Hellenistic friendship conventions suggests another way of looking at the exchange between Jesus and his disciples (11:11–15). It seems fair to ask if Jesus' direct speech to his disciples might be an act of friendship, through which Jesus reveals the hard truth of their friend Lazarus's death and prepares them for the consequences. The disciples need to face squarely Lazarus's death in order to begin contemplating the significance

---

[34]E.g., A. Loisy, *Le Quatrième Évangile* (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1903) 651.

[35]For a discussion of this aspect of John, see R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and G. R. O'Day, *Revelation in Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

of what is to come, and that is impossible unless they realize that Lazarus is dead, not merely ill and sleeping. Jesus himself links his "plain speaking" to the disciples' welfare ("For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe," v. 15). Jesus must speak frankly to the disciples about Lazarus's death in order to equip them for the role of disciple that the situation may demand of them, in this case, to see a revelation of God's glory in the raising of Lazarus and so come to believe (cf. 11:2 and 15). Jesus treats the disciples as equals by speaking plainly to them.

The importance of *parrēsia* as a mode of speaking and instruction in John can also be seen in 16:25–33. This passage, set at the end of the Farewell Discourse and immediately preceding the Farewell Prayer (John 17), contains Jesus' last words of instruction to his disciples. Jesus contrasts his present speaking to his disciples, which has been "in figures of speech" (*en paroimiais*), with his eschatological teaching ("the hour is coming"), in which he "will tell you plainly (*parrēsia*) of the Father" (v. 25). The contrast between figurative and direct speech tends to shape the interpretation of these verses,[36] but again one wonders if Hellenistic friendship conventions suggest another context in which to read Jesus' words here, especially since the vocabulary of friendship (*phileō*) occurs twice in vv. 26–27. Here, Jesus links the effects of the eschatological teaching ("you will ask in my name") with the Father's love of the disciples (*autos gar ho pater philei hymas*) and the disciples' love of Jesus (*hymeis eme pephilekate*).

Love and friendship are the goal of Jesus' "plain speaking." Rather than simply initiating fresh comprehension on the disciples' part, Jesus leads them to trust the relationship of love and friendship that they have with God and Jesus and thus to speak to God on their own without the mediation of Jesus' speech on their behalf (v. 26). Jesus points the disciples to a different way of being with God and one another. This is why in vv. 30–33 Jesus disputes the disciples' claim to comprehend his plain speaking and hence to believe (v. 29). Comprehension without enactment misses the point of speaking *parrēsia.* Plain speaking has its effect when the disciples act on God's love of them and their love of Jesus.

The combination of plain speaking and love is also found in Jesus' words to the disciples about friendship in 15:15. Although the word *parrēsia* does not occur, the sense of plain speaking does. Jesus gives the following rationale for calling the disciples friends: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known everything that I have heard from the Father." The disciples are Jesus' friends because he has spoken to them openly; he has made known to them everything (*panta*) that he has heard from the Father. As Schnackenburg has noted about 15:15, "Jesus enables his disciples to participate in the intimacy and trust of the Father, by means of which they acquire that 'openness' (*parrēsia*)

[36]Interestingly, Schnackenburg, who noted the connection between *parrēsia* and friendship in connection with 15:15 (see n. 33), makes no connection between "speaking openly" and friendship here (*St. John,* 3.161–66).

which is the privilege of a free man and a friend . . . ."[37]

In this verse, the two motifs of friendship, love and open speech, come together in Jesus' relationship with his disciples. They are his friends because he speaks plainly and openly to them and tells them everything about God (15:15; 16:25) and because he loves them and gives his life for them (13:1; 15:12–13). They will remain his friends if they keep his commandment and love one another as he has loved them (15:14, 17). They are empowered to keep his commandment because he has told them everything, and so they have their own new relationship with God who loves them (16:26–27).

The third context in Hellenistic friendship conventions in which *parrēsia* occurs is that of freedom of speech. This is related to the flattery/frank speech contrast: a friend is someone who, both in private and public, always speaks openly and honestly regardless of the cost. Two occurrences of *parrēsia* point to this context. In ch. 7, the crowd notes, "Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill? And here he is, speaking openly (*parrēsia*), but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?" (7:25–26). The crowd's words testify to Jesus' character as one who does not shirk from the exercise of free and frank speech. Despite the personal risk, Jesus speaks openly in the face of the authorities.

Jesus did what the philosophers only talked about—he lay down his life for his friends. This makes all the difference in appropriating friendship as a theological category.

In the second occurrence, Jesus speaks to his own character and the open character of his ministry. In his trial before the high priest, in response to questions "about his disciples and his teaching" (18:19), Jesus answers, "I have spoken openly (*parrēsia*) to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (v. 20). In the light of Hellenistic friendship conventions, it is possible to read Jesus' words here as signifying more than just the distinction between public and private teachings. Rather, they show also that Jesus embodies the traits of open and direct speech, the hallmarks of friendship. At Jesus' trial, the moment of greatest public exposure, Jesus describes his ministry as having been characterized by freedom of speech throughout its duration. Jesus has not held anything back in his self-revelation but has spoken with the freedom that marks a true friend. His open and honest words are more important than any personal risk.

Here, too, in the exercise of free and frank speech, there is an important convergence

[37] *St. John*, 3.110. Ambrose, in *De officiis ministrorum* 3.22.135, sees in John 15:15 one of the core practices of Christian friendship: "Let us reveal our bosom to [a friend], and let him reveal his to us. Therefore, he said, I have called you friends, because all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you. Therefore a friend hides nothing, if he is true: he pours forth his mind, just as the Lord Jesus poured forth the mysteries of his Father." See Konstan, "History of Christian Friendship," 106–110.

between word and deed. As the incarnate Word, Jesus does not simply exercise freedom of speech; he embodies freedom of action. Jesus' entire life and ministry is an exercise of *parrēsia.* For example, his ministry is marked by repeated journeys to Jerusalem (2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 10:22; 12:1), the official seat of those in religious and political power. Even when the personal risk is quite apparent, Jesus chooses to live his life in boldness and openness. In one of the initial acts of his ministry, Jesus visits the Jerusalem temple and announces with both word and deed the truth that shapes his work in the world (2:13–22). This act sets the tone for what is to follow and demonstrates the truth of Jesus' statement in 18:20, "I have spoken openly to the world." His trial before Pilate also embodies open and frank speech, because Jesus does not hesitate to speak the truth to this figure of authority (see esp. 18:33–38).

CONCLUSION

Hellenistic friendship conventions assist us in understanding further the portrait of Jesus that the Fourth Evangelist has created with these bold words and actions. Such boldness resonates with what the Hellenistic philosophers taught about friendship. Jesus is a true friend not only because of the gift of his own life but also because throughout his life he has spoken openly.

These two friendship traits are connected: Jesus is willing to speak and act boldly throughout his life because he is willing to lay down his life. Jesus is the ultimate friend. Friendship in John is the enactment of the love of God that is incarnate in Jesus and that Jesus boldly makes available to the world.