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The walls came tumbling down

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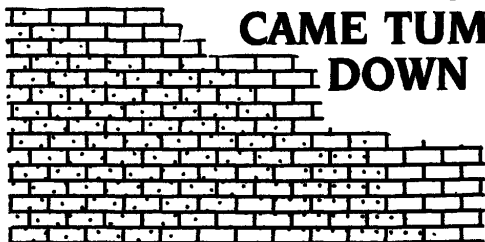
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THE WALLS CAME TUMBLING DOWN



One of the marks of genuine friendship is its underlying assumption of radical equality and mutuality. Two people cannot remain friends unless in the long run each gives to the other as much as he or she receives. In this issue we've chosen to look at friendship and ask whether real mutuality can be cultivated across barriers which by their very nature have caused inequality.

Can a woman and a man be true friends, for example, when (among other obstacles) there is a long history of male dominance? Can a black or brown woman relate equally with a white woman when racial prejudice permeates our society? Can a single person share a friendship with a married person when the latter's first commitment must be to his/her spouse? Can gay and straight people form friendships in the face of homophobia? Can class structures be broken down?

I can say yes to these questions—but only when there are other compensations for social inequality. I have, for instance, one friend who has had far less formal education than I. Her letters are peppered with grammatical errors and I often have to read between the lines to understand her thoughts. Yet I am constantly amazed at her spiritual depth, at the abounding fruit of the Spirit in her life, and the way she calls out the same qualities in me. Once, while praying

for her, I had a vision of what she will be like in the New Kingdom—and in my vision I was appointed her student!

I have two black women friends in my neighborhood. Any social advantage I may have because of color is easily offset by their unique talents, by their amazing ability to endure hardship, and by the depths of their insight into human nature. Both of them can, oh joy, understand a white woman like me.

Sitting up late one evening, I was pondering the biblical basis for such friendships across barriers, what models we have in the Bible and whether equality is stressed within these models. Mentally I skimmed over the New Testament—and suddenly it was like watching a city come to life at dusk. Lights twinkled everywhere until the whole landscape blazed. The New Testament positively sings with cross-race, cross-sex, and cross-class friendships!

I thought of the four gospels and Jesus' incredible relationships with women, and how Luke 8:1-3 tells us that women were ministering to Jesus at the same time he ministered to them. I thought of Paul, the passion of whose life was to take the gospel to the Gentiles, to break down walls of separation dividing Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. I remembered the deep respect he accords his female co-workers, the

love directed toward his mixed-race friend Timothy, the energy spent raising Onesimus' status from slave to brother. One must conclude that radical equality in human relationships springs from the heart of the gospel itself

* * *

Out of the many examples that dot the biblical scene, one passage catches the light of cross-barrier relating and focuses it with particular intensity. In Luke 10:25–42 a lawyer comes to Jesus and asks how to inherit eternal life.

"What do you read in the law?" asks Jesus.

"Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength," declares the lawyer, "and your neighbor as yourself."

"You've got it," concludes Jesus. "Do this and no more worries about eternal life."

But the lawyer wasn't satisfied, no doubt because he had always tried to be fair with those of his social class and gender, and still uneasiness nagged at him. "Yeah, but Rabbi, that just hasn't cut it for me. I mean, how do you do it? Who is my neighbor anyhow?"

With an artist's touch, Luke has arranged the next two stories to show, first, how one loves one's neighbor, and second, how one loves God. It is not by accident that both feature an equal relationship emerging from an inherently unequal situation.

The story of the Good Samaritan is dramatically cross-racial, but the racial inequality is compensated for. It is the *Jews* who have the inherent status, even the half-dead one. But it is the *Samaritan* who has the means of healing, the means of transportation, the money—and the great heart. Jesus turned things around in his story to show the utter necessity of equality in human relationships before a genuine neighborliness (friendship) can be achieved. For the person of higher social status, it is better to first be on the receiving end in order to equalize the relationship.

Then, to show how one loves God with entire heart and soul, Luke includes the famous scene of Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary. This account is dramatically cross-sexual. In her deep hunger to know God, Mary casts aside the burden of her expected female role as cook and hostess. She plops down at Jesus' feet and listens. Jesus, her superior by gender and education, senses Mary's intense singlemindedness that matches his own passion to know God, and he brings her to his level by sharing his wisdom with her. Does she also share her thoughts with him? At any rate, two kindred spirits meet and a special interaction occurs. Mary's moment of radical equality with her beloved friend Jesus will never be taken from her. And Jesus, I think, sat in awe of this woman whose spiritual depth caused her to leap as great a social barrier as he had ever done. Together they had met in the presence of God.

Can it be, I wonder, that the greatest commandment—to love God and one's neighbor as oneself—is *grounded* in this principle of mutuality? Does our very hope of eternal life rest on this extravagant outpouring of passion and compassion which breaks down external, unequal walls within human relationships? Jesus implies this in his conversation with the lawyer. Luke confirms it in holding up the Good Samaritan and Mary as model disciples.

Both Mary and the Samaritan represent the "underdog" in their respective stories, yet both took the initiative in making or cementing a friendship. For all us women, especially women of color, or any person who through some handicap ends up in an inferior social position, we are here presented with models of how to break down those social barriers. "Do this," says Jesus, "and no more worries about inheriting abounding, rich, everlasting life!"

—Reta Halteman Finger