

Holy God, send Your Word, send Your Spirit, send Your love. Amen.

Why did I make Kristin/Tom wade through all those Greek and Hebrew names?

That is not a reading that will ever show up in the lectionary.

But I wanted us to get a sense of the web of relationships in which Paul operated,
the spiritual friendships that sustained his ministry
and deepened his relationship with God.

The life of following Christ is a communal life, lived in such webs of relationships.

The first thing Jesus did was call into being a community in which he would live out
and demonstrate the power and love of that realm he called the Kingdom of God.

And as each person saw for themselves just who Jesus truly was,

as they responded to the amazing experience of realizing God was so close,
they couldn't help but tell the people closest to them.

So we see this sequence in the very earliest days of Jesus ministry...

Andrew is a disciple of John the Baptist. John points to Jesus one day and says,

“There goes the Lamb of God.” Hmmm – this guy must be something.

Andrew and a friend follow Jesus to see where he's going –

he turns around and says, “What are you looking for?” –

always a great starter for a spiritual conversation, by the way...

And they say they want to know where he's hanging out –

they might want to join him. “Come and see,” he says,

always a great way to continue a spiritual conversation, by the way.

They hang out for the rest of the day and by nightfall Andrew is convinced

Jesus is the real deal. He runs to tell his brother Simon, who comes and sees
and is given a new name, Peter.

Meanwhile, Jesus tells another person from their town, Philip, “Follow me.”

He does, and realizes who Jesus is, and runs to tell his friend Nathanael.

“Come and see.” This is how we introduce Jesus to our friends –

telling of our experiences with him, inviting them to come and see.

These were soul friends. Not soul mates – that's a term we use to describe
a romantic connection that may or may not actually involve the soul.

Soul friend, or *anam cara*, as the Celts called it, is a person with whom you feel

deeply connected, who helps you be more aware of the activity of God in your life.

God is here. God is always here, surrounding us, filling us, empowering us, soothing us, leading us, propelling us, blessing us, healing us, forgiving us... God's life is as real as the one we spent 98 percent of our time living, this very material world with its human connections.

There are times when the veil between this world and that becomes achingly thin – The Celts called that “thin space.” There are certain places that are “thin spaces” for us – where the holiness of God is powerfully present. There are certain times, occasions, when we find ourselves in a thin space...

And there are people who help us become aware of thin space and navigate it. *anam chiared*. I think I have been *anam cara* for at least one of my friends, with whom I now meet regularly in a prayer group.

She was a parishioner at my first church, an active Roman Catholic laywoman, with four children – Brendan, Aidan, Moira, Clare and soon Fiona to come – can you guess her ethnicity? She was director of education at a local catholic church but had started to attend our services.

One Thanksgiving Day, I did a 10 am service attended by three other people, one of them Tricia, so I invited them to come up to the altar during the communion prayer; seemed silly for us to be so far apart.

Tricia stood across from me, Ray and Vivian on each side.

And while I was praying the prayer of consecration one of those “thin spaces” opened up and I looked at Tricia and thought, “We could easily swap places.”

I could see her celebrating eucharist, see her being a priest.

After the service I took her aside and said, “Have you ever felt a vocation?”

She said, “Yes! Many. I feel a vocation to be a teacher, a wife, a mother...”

“How about a priest?” I said. She just looked at me and her eyes began to fill.

“I didn't know I was allowed to ask that question,” she said...

So began a journey that led her through seminary to ordination to serving churches. She is a magnificent priest, a wonderful preacher. And we have continued to provide wisdom for each other. Soul friends. *Anam chiared*.

This is what one author wrote about soul friendships:

“Soul friendships are spaces in which God is deeply present to us in our thin times. In God's love we never die, for the love that we share as of the divine, and as such, that love is eternal. Soul friends teach us how to love and how to live, but they also teach us how to pass from this life into the next, where our souls are immortal.”

*In this way, soul friends are midwives of the soul,
helping bring to birth God's plan for our lives and into thin space.”¹*

It was common for Celtic monks and leaders to have *anam chiarde*, who “combined the roles of spiritual director, guru, confessor and confidential counselor, as Ian Bradley writes in *The Celtic Way*.² These were often laymen and laywomen, who brought a gift of discernment and clarity to the relationship.

Soul friendship is not a connection that can be fabricated, but it can be cultivated. If you feel a spiritual connection with someone in your life or church;
if there is something about them that draws you to better understand their wisdom or the peace they exude – get to know them.
Have coffee, and talk about your spiritual life, your spiritual self.
If they share theirs too, you may just have an *anam cara* to help you walk this life.

We are not meant to walk this Way of Love alone; we have a community. “Greet one another with a holy kiss,” Paul admonished his readers – that is the sign of the peace we share each Sunday, a sign of the love that binds us, deeper even than our family ties. If you want to go to a deeper level with your faith, you need to open your heart to sharing your spiritual life with others, and if God brings it, with another. This is counter-cultural for us – we’re told to keep our “religion” private. That’s in part why we worship with only 20-30 others on a given Sunday. Jesus said, “Go and tell!” “Come and see.”

If we are to go deeper, we need to become more comfortable having spiritual conversations and noticing our thin places. So this morning I’d like us to practice. Find someone in the church, perhaps someone you don’t talk to often, and ask them, “What are you looking for?” And then let them ask you the same question. That’s where community begins. That’s where we find our *anam chiared*.

Amen.

¹ *Braving the Thin Places: Celtic Wisdom to Create a Space for Grace*, Julianne Stanz, p. 105 (Loyola Press)

² *The Celtic Way*, Ian Bradley, p. 73

John 1:35-46

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet Mary, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss.