Having a faith conversation with old and new friends is as easy as setting the table.

FAITH FEEDS

FAITH FEEDS GUIDE FOR RESIDENT ASSISTANTS
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The FAITH FEEDS program for Resident Assistants that is a catalyst for faith conversation and community building in residence halls. Students gather over coffee, a potluck breakfast or dinner and the R.A. facilitates a conversation using the themes, articles and discussion questions in this Guide.

The Guide was developed from popular Agape Latte talks and articles from the C21 Center’s C21 Resources magazine.

The FAITH FEEDS Guide offers an easy guide for planning and the content highlights the following themes: Friendship, Gratitude, Forgiveness, Family, and Service. You will notice that the Friendship section offers four articles instead of just one. You can decide to discuss each article over the course of the semester or just tackle one and move on to the other themes.

The Faith Feeds program is very pliable, offering you a chance to be creative with the content. The C21 Center is happy to offer FAITH FEEDS napkins, stickers, and gathering prayer cards. There are also FAITH FEEDS totes for give-away items.
READY TO GET STARTED?

STEP ONE
Decide to host a FAITH FEEDS. Think of a comfortable space, conducive for conversation. Select a theme/article for your FAITH FEEDS conversation.

STEP TWO
Reach out to your students and let them know the FAITH FEEDS date/time/location and theme in advance. Arrange for coffee, pizza, food.

STEP THREE
Reach out to Karen Kiefer (karen.kiefer@bc.edu) at the C21 Center and request FAITH FEEDS swag, including napkins, stickers, gathering message/prayer cards and FAITH FEEDS totes for give-aways.

STEP FOUR
Review selected article and questions in advance of your FAITH FEEDS. Conversation will grow organically. Enjoy!
FRIENDSHIP
I went over to Greece to visit with Nick, and on my last day there I said to him, “There’s something I need to tell you: I love you, and I’ve cherished every day of my 30-year friendship with you.” He said to me, “I love you, too, and I know I’m going to die, but I need you to know that I’m happy, I’m at peace, and I believe that we’ll see each other again in the Kingdom.”

His words were the most profoundly beautiful thing a friend had ever said to me. Here I was angry at the world and feeling sorry for myself, and here he was confronting the cruelest of illnesses, and somehow he was happy, he was at peace, and he was thinking about God’s Kingdom.

I left him that day and promised that I would be back to see him as soon as I could. I fulfilled my promise and returned around six months later. Upon arriving, I noticed how much he had declined. He was confined to a bed and a chair, and his speech was now slurred. On the last day of my visit I said to him, “I can’t explain this, but I need you to tell me what I can do for you. It would do me wonders to do something for you.” He said, “There is something that I’d like you to do.” I said, Anything, anything at all.” And he said, “I want you to go to Confession.”

Confession? I was shocked. I thought he was going to ask me to run a marathon in his honor, start a scholarship, find a cure, paint his house, anything. But Confession? I had not been to Confession in years. I guess I just could not go there. I went to Mass faithfully every Sunday and offered my sins up to God, but I could not embrace the sacrament of reconciliation. I was hurt and angry over the losses I had endured, and I selfishly felt that I was owed more than I was getting in return.

So I returned home, having made a deathbed promise to a dying friend that I would go to Confession. And I did what guys always do: I put it off. I put it off until the week before I was scheduled to return to Greece to see my friend. That Sunday before my trip, the priest talked at Mass about an Archdiocesan initiative called The Light Is On for You, where local parishes offer the sacrament of reconciliation on Wednesday evenings from 6:30 to 8 p.m.

The Wednesday evening before my Thursday flight, I set out to fulfill my promise. I went to my parish in the town where I live. I walked up the stairs, still not embracing the concept, but knowing what I had to do. I entered the church and saw my pastor entering into the confessional to hear confessions. I said, “Time out. I know him. He knows me. This is too personal. This won’t work for me.”
So I left and went to a different church on the other side of my town. The format in this parish is to go into a small room, shut the door, and sit face-to-face across from the priest for an open confession. I did not like it. I thought, “This is too informal. I’m out of here.” So I left and I drove to a different town.

I went into a church in a neighboring town and was sitting in the pew, awaiting my turn to go into the confessional, when I looked to my right and suddenly saw the mother an ex-girlfriend - a girl I had dated in college - enter the church. I thought, “I have 20 years’ worth of sins, and the mother of my ex is going to see me in Confession for a half hour!” All I could picture was her calling my ex-girlfriend and saying, “I saw that no-good former boyfriend of yours at Confession last night, and he was in there for 30 minutes! Thirty minutes’ worth of sins. It’s a good thing you dumped him when you did!”

I got in my car, drove down the street, and eventually came to St. Anne’s Parish - St. Anne, the mother of the Blessed Mother. I walked into St. Anne’s and as I was going up the stairs, the church lights were suddenly turned off. I looked at my watch. It was 8:30. I had blown my chance. I could not believe it. I had reneged on a promise to my dying friend. I was furious with myself. Then, amazingly, the parish priest looked out and realized that I was standing on the steps. So he turned the church lights back on, unlocked the door, and went into the confessional, illuminating the light above. I entered the confessional, knelt down and said, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It’s been 20 years since my last Confession, and I’m here only because I promised my best friend that I’d do this. So please forgive me. Here are my sins…”

I let it all out - 20 years’ worth of sins, regrets, mistakes, everything. And when I finished, in the kindest of voices, the priest said to me:

“You have to understand that God loves you. He loves you unconditionally and He forgives your transgressions because He made you and He understands you. God wants more than anything for you to be happy. So all this baggage that you’ve been carrying around for 20 years, let it go. Let it go, because God wants you to be free to live your life to the fullest. All He asks is that you go forth and do your best to sin no more.”

Overcome with emotion, I thanked him, and as I got up to leave, he said, “And one more thing: You have a hell of a friend.”

I cannot explain it in any other way, but I felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I felt joyous. I felt liberated from the burdens I had carried in my heart for years. I went home, and the next day I kissed my wife and my kids and flew to Greece to see my dying friend. Upon arriving, it was clear that he had worsened. He was very thin, and could no longer speak, but his eyes lit up when I walked in. I said, “Nick, I have something to share with you. I went to Confession as you asked and I feel wonderful. I have never felt better. I will never be able to thank you for what you did for me.”

And he burst into tears.

Jack Dunn is Associate Vice President for University Communications at Boston College.
“Stories shape who we are, where we come from, how we understand ourselves.”
—Brian Braman, Professor of the Practice of Philosophy, Boston College

Summary:
Jack Dunn recounts a pivotal moment in his own faith journey in which he makes a promise to a dying friend that he will return to the sacrament of Confession. Despite facing internal and external roadblocks, Jack is ultimately able to make good on his word. In the end, he shares that he gained more than he gave in the process.

Questions for Reflection:
1. What have been the pivotal moments in your own faith journey?
2. What are the friendships and relationships that have shaped your faith?
3. Are there aspects of faith that you’d like to reintroduce into your routine or revisit?
4. Have you had a similar, life-changing experience with Confession or the Eucharist?
IN LUKE’S GOSPEL, Jesus tells a moving story. There was a beggar named Lazarus who lived in the streets. He was hungry and his legs were covered with sores. Living opposite him, in a beautiful house, was a rich man who used to give big parties for his friends. Lazarus would have liked to have eaten some of the crumbs that fell from his table, but the dogs ate them up. One day, Lazarus died and went to the place of peace, in the “heart of Abraham.” The rich man also died and he went to the “place of torment.” Looking up, he saw Lazarus radiant with peace and he cried out: “Father Abraham, please send Lazarus down to put some water on my lips for I am in pain!” Abraham responded: “It is impossible. Between you and him there is an abyss that nobody can cross.” He could have added: “Just as there had been an abyss between you and him during your life on earth.”
This story of Lazarus tells us a lot about today’s world, where there is a huge abyss between those who have food, money, and comfort and those who are hungry or have no place of their own. I remember seeing children in Calcutta, their noses glued to the window of a luxurious restaurant. From time to time, the doorman would shoo them away. The rich—and that includes me and many of you who are reading this—do not like to see dirty beggars staring at them. Haven’t we all felt embarrassment and fear in front of those who are hungry?

What is this abyss that separates people? Why are we unable to look Lazarus straight in the eye and listen to him?

I suspect we exclude Lazarus because we are frightened that our hearts will be touched if we enter into a relationship with him. If we listen to his story and hear his cry of pain we will discover he is a human being. We might be touched by his broken heart and by his misfortunes. What happens when our hearts are touched? We might want to do something to comfort and help him, to alleviate his pain, and where will that lead us? As we enter into dialogue with a beggar, we risk entering into an adventure. Because Lazarus needs not only money but also a place to stay, medical treatment, maybe work, and, even more, he needs friendship.

This is why it is dangerous to enter into a relationship with the Lazaruses of our world. If we do, we risk our lives being changed.

All of us are, more or less, locked up in our cultures, in our habits, even in our friendships and places of belonging. If I become the friend of a beggar, I rock the boat. Friends may feel uncomfortable, even threatened, by my new ways; perhaps they feel challenged to do likewise. They may become aggressive, they may criticize the foolish, so-called utopian ways of the one in their midst who befriends a beggar.

I am beginning to discover how fear is a terrible motivating force in all our lives. We are frightened of failure and of rejection. And I have become increasingly aware not only of my own fears but of the fears of others. Fear is at the root of all forms of exclusion, just as trust is at the root of all forms of inclusion.

This fear of the different is very marked when it comes to people with intellectual disabilities. I remember when I first met Fr. Thomas Phillippe, the French priest who became my spiritual companion when I left the navy and who was instrumental in the founding of L’Arche. He invited me to meet his “new friends” in a small institution where he was the chaplain. At the time, I was teaching philosophy at St. Michael’s College in Toronto. I accepted his invitation but, nevertheless, I was very anxious. How was I going to communicate with people who could not talk? If they could talk, what could we talk about? I was fearful of not being able to cope with the situation or of not knowing what to do and of being inadequate.

People with intellectual disabilities are generally placed at the lowest end of the human spectrum. When I first encountered them at L’Arche, I believed in love but, for me, love meant generosity, doing good for others. At that time, I did not realize that through our love we can help others to discover their own intrinsic value; we can reveal to them their beauty and their uniqueness.

Gradually, through L’Arche, I began to see the value of the communion of hearts and of a love that empowers, that helps others to stand up; a love that shows itself in humility and in trust. If our society has difficulty in functioning, if we are continually confronted by a world in crisis, full of violence, of fear, of abuse, I suggest it is because we are not clear about what it means to be human. We tend to reduce being human to acquiring knowledge, power, and social status. We have disregarded the heart, seeing it only as a symbol of weakness, the center of sentimentality and emotion, instead of as a powerhouse of love that can reorient us from our self-centeredness, revealing to us and to others the basic beauty of humanity, empowering us to grow.

The excluded, I believe, live certain values that we all need to discover and to live ourselves before we can become truly human. It is not just a question of performing good deeds for those who are excluded but of being open and vulnerable to them in order to receive the life that they can offer; it is to become their friends. If we start to include the disadvantaged in our lives and enter into heartfelt relationships with them, they will change things in us. They will call us to be people of mutual trust, to take time to listen and be with each other. They will call us out from our individualism and need for power into belonging to each other and being open to others. They will break down the prejudices and protective walls that gave rise to exclusion in the first place. They will then start to affect our human organizations, revealing new ways of being and walking together.

Jean Vanier is a philosopher, theologian, and humanitarian, and the founder of the international movement of L’Arche communities.

John Vanier, Becoming Human (Paulist Press, 1998), 69-71, 76-78, 84, excerpts reprinted with permission of Paulist Press.

Photo Credit: Page 12: Courtesy of L’Arche Boston.
"If anyone says, “I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar: for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." —1 John 4:20

Summary

In this excerpt from his book *Becoming Human*, Jean Vanier reflects on how Christians are called to friendship with “the least of these,” those who are vulnerable, outcast, or on the margins. Vanier couches that command in light of the story that Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke about Lazarus and the rich man. As someone who has spent his life caring for persons with intellectual disabilities – those he says are “placed at the lowest end of the human spectrum” – Vanier challenges readers to consider not only who they are called to befriend but also the way in which they demonstrate friendship through a personal and intimate encounter. This piece is about becoming friends with “the other” out of love for Jesus.

Questions for Conversation

- Vanier says that “fear is the form of all exclusion” and “trust is the root of all forms of inclusion.” Have you ever been afraid or embarrassed to extend friendship to someone? What did you do to overcome it?
- Do you think Vanier is right that people’s deepest longing is for friendship?
- Do you have opportunities to encounter the poor or the vulnerable in your daily life? If not, where might you seek them out?
- Are there people closer to home who might need you to reach out in friendship?
- In our polarized times, it can be hard to extend friendship to people with different political, religious, or cultural values than those we espouse. How might we overcome these differences and forge friendships with them? Is it possible to be friends with “the other” in our world today?
FAITH FEEDS - RESIDENT ASSISTANTS

BOSTON COLLEGE | THE CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY CENTER

NEGOTIATING RELATIONSHIPS

by Kerry Cronin

The thing about in college is this: You could date someone, go out, have a good time, then have a fight and a breakup, then get back together again, then meet their parents, have drama, break up again, get back together again, and really solve your problems all in about 10 days. This is because life is so intense in college.

Ultimately, it takes time to reveal our feelings to ourselves and to another person. That is what dating should be in that first level. What you are doing is just finding out if you want to reveal yourself to that person. Then, in level two you open yourself up. The revelation that dating can precipitate for us on this campus is something that I think we really long for and want to strive for. It would be a great if we could expand the conversation on campus. We could begin to move past the thought that I hear from students of, ‘yeah, I wish it weren’t this way, but it is. We just don’t date. We just don’t do that thing.’

This dating culture could really happen. Part of what makes creating a healthy dating scene difficult because the campus so polarized. It is so strangely awkward or freakish to date somebody. The hookup scene is so ugly and weird that people just opt out or they get into serious relationships way too fast.

I want to end with an email I received from a student to whom I had been talking for a while: ‘Meredith and I are a couple now. I’m so happy that we’re together. Thank you for encouraging me to do this. She’s an incredible person and I think we complement each other very well. She’s met my friends and she fits in with them. I made sure that they would be themselves, mostly to shield her. We can be a pretty obnoxious crowd. My friends didn’t disappoint. Meredith was able to be herself among them and so was I. She met my mom and sister on Monday when they drove me back after a long weekend. It was only an hour. It was a good first date with the family. I’ll meet her family on Sunday. I am big time nervous, but I’m hopeful.’

What I wish for this campus is for each of you to go and talk to six people on campus about this dating idea. Then, ask somebody out. Whether or not it is a crazy idea, real intimacy in friendships is fantastic, but what I hear from students is a deep longing for the kind of relationships that we are not really getting to have in college. Get out there and go on a date!

Kerry Cronin is associate director of the Lonergan Institute at Boston College.
NEGOTIATING RELATIONSHIPS

“The opposite of Loneliness is not Togetherness. It’s Intimacy”
—Richard Bach

Summary
In an excerpt from one of her Agape Latte talks, Professor Kerry Cronin shares her desire for Boston College students: that they recognize the deficiencies of the hook-up culture and find the courage to pursue meaningful dating relationships built on mutual trust and steady self-revelation.

Questions for Reflection:
1. Cronin posits that most students wish that a healthy dating culture would replace the hook-up culture. Do you agree with her assessment? What are steps that can be taken to make that a reality?
2. It seems like people experience loneliness whether they participate in the hook-up culture or choose not to. What are ways to overcome loneliness at Boston College? Where can students find support to find meaningful relationships, conversations, and experiences?
3. For persons of faith, we believe that our human relationships should model our relationship with God, who reveals Himself to us little by little over time, building up trust and making room for vulnerability. How does your faith life inform your most intimate relationships with friends, family members, or the person you are dating?
Deep and Abiding Friendship Lasts Forever

Robert Newton

LAST MONTH, three members of my University of Scranton 1957 graduating class died, two of whom I knew well and regarded as good friends. We had gone our separate ways after graduation but the memories of our interactions and my admiration for them had not dimmed over the succeeding decades, even with only occasional sightings and reports. Their obituaries bore out their exceptional lives of accomplishment and generosity.

Earlier this year, I decided, after several years of silence except for Christmas greetings, to reconnect with Patrick O’Brien, a dear friend of 60-plus years. I wrote him a long letter over a weekend and mailed it Monday morning. On Wednesday, I received a call from his wife saying she had received the letter that day, and my friend had died on the previous Sunday after 10 days in the hospital suffering from pneumonia. I wrote her a long letter describing key moments in our friendship over his lifetime, reflecting on how much that friendship had colored and in some instances changed my life.

I came to Boston College 38 years ago, where I met Bill Neenan, S.J. We worked together for 11 years in academic administration and established a deep respect and friendship. When he retired as academic vice president, he presided in a house across from my office. Twice a week, sometimes more, I would visit him and was always greeted with: “Come on in; have you heard the latest? or have I got a story to tell you!” He died suddenly a few years ago after a rich and fulfilling life, a life dedicated to finding God in everyone he encountered.
When I reflect on these old friends, I can say both that I miss them, but also that I do not miss them—because I continue to experience their presence in my life: their goodness, their humanity, their humor, their faith, the joy and fulfillment that was mine through knowing them. I imagine that others reading this reflection who are in later life have the same experience.

The Mass of Christian burial reminds us: “Indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven.” It remains my conviction that in death, friendship is changed not ended, and that when a good friend departs, he or she remains vibrant in the lives they touched in their earthly pilgrimage, continuing to enlighten and enrich those who live on. A true friendship transcends the grave, bridging the boundary between life and death.

ROBERT NEWTON is the special assistant to the president at Boston College. He previously served as the associate academic vice president.

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PHOTO CREDITS: Page 14: Thank you to the Special Collections staff at the Weinberg Memorial Library, University of Scranton, for use of the 1957 Commencement photo.
“Friendship ... is born at the moment when one man says to another 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one...’”
—C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves

Summary
In this piece, author Bob Newton reflects on several unexpected but enduring friendships. Newton details the pivotal and life-changing roles certain friends played in his life and the qualities that he most admired in them. In the end, Newton makes the claim that true friendships endure even with the passage of time and can transcend the grave.

Questions for Conversation
• What are the qualities that you look for in a friend?
• What do you hope your friends say about you?
• Is it important to you that your friends share your values or faith? Why or why not?
• Do you agree with Newton’s claims that our friendships last beyond death?
• Pope Francis often says that “God is full of surprises.” Oftentimes, the people who become our closest friends come to us as a surprise. Have you had unexpected friendships? Have you considered how they might be God’s “surprise” gift to you?
GRATITUDE
I’ve learned that there’s nothing to be learned from losing a game twice. When you lose once, you learn something. The second time around, you ain’t learned nothing. That’s one thing.

The second thing I’ve learned is the longest river in the United States is the Missouri River. Not the Mississippi River, which all of you people that somehow sneaked into Boston College erroneously thinking that the Mississippi River was the longest – you are dead wrong. Google it when you get back to your apartment. So those are two things I’ve learned.

The third thing I’ve learned is you were born on third base – all of us. We have people here of a lot of different traditions. Whether you’re Catholic, Jewish, Unitarian, Methodist, Muslim – whatever you are, this has been passed on to you. It’s been passed on to you. And here we are.

John Bapst was a Jesuit in 1855-ish. He used to come down from Canada and celebrate Mass with the French Canadian Catholics. Maine, at that time, had very few Catholics. In fact, there was a lot of anti-Catholic prejudice against the French Canadians. He came down to this French Canadian family, and he was celebrating Mass in the home. And this family had three kids in the Ellsworth public schools.

In those days, you had to read the Bible, and you had to have the King James translation of the Bible. The King James is named after King James of England. I grew up as a little boy – that was the Protestant translation. Well, this was a Catholic family, and they had the Catholic translation, which was called Douay-Rheims – two towns in Europe where the Bible was translated. They had that. But they wouldn’t allow this family to use the Catholic translation. Father Bapst said, “No, you got a right to do it.” Use it. Well, he got in trouble. And the people in Ellsworth, Maine, drove him out of town and said, don’t come back, because if you come back, you’re in real trouble.

Well, he came back about six months later. And he was celebrating Mass in this house, and the people of Ellsworth knew he was there. They got him. They tailed and feathered him. Now tar – you know what tar is? It’s that hot black stuff. They poured that hot black stuff on him. Then they took feathers. You guys know what chickens are – you’ve seen a chicken – that’s feathers. They stuck the feathers on him. And they tied him to a tree, and they started a fire at his feet. They were going to burn him to death. And the Presbyterian minister in Ellsworth intervened and saved his life.

That’s Bapst – John Bapst. He was the first president of Boston College. We are here today, all of us, on third base because people like Bapst did what they did and founded Boston College.

WILLIAM B. NEEAN, S.J. (1929-2014) was Vice President and Special Assistant to the President at Boston College.
BORN ON THIRD BASE

“Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope…”
—1 Peter 3:15

Summary
In an essay adapted from his 2015 Agape Latte talk, the late William B. Neenan, S.J., explores the idea that we are, in many ways, the sum of the stories and sacrifices of those who came before us. Our own story is shaped by the faith lives of others and the points of intersection between their lives and ours.

Questions for Reflection:
1. Many of us have a lot of people to thank for helping us to get to where we are today. Who are some of the people God has put in your life who have helped shape your story?
2. Father Neenan shares that life has a lot of lessons to teach us. Can you share some of the lessons that you’ve learned through your faith life?
3. What lessons do you want to pass down to future generations? Whose story might God be calling you to shape?
FORGIVENESS
A TIME TO FORGIVE

by Stephen Pope

Stephen Pope, theology professor at Boston College, spoke to students about the importance of offering forgiveness. Here’s an excerpt from the Agape Latte talk:

One day during Lent, I was giving a talk at a parish about sin and forgiveness. After the talk, a guy named Seamus came up to me. He was about 80 years old, a first-generation American whose parents had come from Ireland. Seamus told me, “I wish I’d heard that talk 65 years ago.” I asked why, and he explained:

When I was 15 years old, my brother John was always beating me up. I told my parents, and my father said I’ve got to toughen up. My mother had eight kids and was trying to work two jobs, so she had no time to pay attention to me crying. I kept telling my brother to stop, but he was older and a lot bigger and stronger than I was. So one day I said, “I’ve had it.” I had been beaten up again and felt humiliated. I left the house in tears, and I never came back. I talked to my parents and to my other siblings, but from that day I never spoke a word to my brother.

Well, about a month ago, my sister called me and said I ought to go see John. He’s in the hospital dying of cancer. So I was going back and forth. I didn’t know what to do. I thought, OK, I’ll go see him, and then I pulled back: If I go there, he’ll just insult me again. I can’t face that humiliation. I’m not going. I go back and forth, back and forth for three or four days. Finally I go to the hospital. I arrive at my brother’s room, and he’s not there. He had died a few hours before.

I wish I had not been so unwilling to forgive. I wish I could’ve put the relationship ahead of my hurt. I’ve been carrying the burden around my entire life, and it would have been the time for me to be free of this anger toward my brother. But I’m still carrying it today because I never got to talk to him. I’ve gone to confession and been absolved, but I still have the feeling.

Seamus’s is a cautionary tale.

Stephen Pope is professor of theology at Boston College.
A TIME TO FORGIVE

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Summary
In this excerpt from an Agape Latte talk, Stephen Pope passes along a lesson about forgiveness. One of his fellow parishioners, Seamus, shared a story with him about overcoming the inhibition which prevented him from forgiving his brother. He also shared the heartbreak he carries with him today over missing the opportunity. Pope shares the story as a cautionary tale to inspire others to not delay forgiving someone who needs it today.

Questions for Reflection:
1. Think of a time in which you had an opportunity to extend forgiveness to someone. What helped you in that process? What factors made it challenging? How did you feel after you had done it?
2. Have you ever been in need of forgiveness? Describe the experience of receiving that gift.
3. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting the wrong done to you or overlooking the demands justice, but it does free you from ill-will and malice towards someone who has offended you. As Christians, we pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Do you find it easier to forgive others because you have experienced God’s forgiveness? Likewise, do you find it easier to experience God’s mercy when you extend it to others?
FAMILY
FR. MICHAEL HIMES, theology professor at Boston College, spoke to an overflow crowd at the popular C21 student speaker series Agape Latte about the power of faith and family. Here’s an excerpt from the talk:

My father died a number of years ago, and my mother was living alone for years. We knew that she shouldn’t be alone any longer, and so she decided to come and live with me, which I was absolutely delighted by. We had about 12 great years together here in Boston. My mother was an avid theatergoer and concertgoer, so we went regularly to the Boston Symphony and to theater here in Boston, and she’d show up at lectures at Boston College and at other universities because she just was interested in all sorts of things.

Finally, Mother began to show the signs, the unmistakable signs, of dementia, probably Alzheimer’s caused. Eventually, it came to the point where we couldn’t leave her alone for a moment. She would wander off. And so she went in to a nursing home. For the next seven years, I went every night to that nursing home and fed her, because they found it hard to get her to eat unless it was me feeding her. I would hold her hand and just talk about anything that popped into my head until Mother dozed off for the evening, and then I would head out.

About a year before she died—she passed away a year ago last January—Mother said she was having a particularly bad evening. She seemed really very distracted. She didn’t know she wasn’t recognizing anybody. And I said to her, “Now, dear, do you know who I am? Do you remember who I am?” And she really scrutinized me. And then she said, “I’m sorry, I don’t know that I could remember your name, but I do know that you’re someone I loved very much.”

Well, I’ve always said to my brother Ken (a Franciscan friar) that Mother was the best theologian in the family, that the two of us were just amateurs compared to her, because she got it exactly right. You may forget everything else, everything else in your life may disappear. You may forget even who loved you and how they loved you. But you never totally forget having loved someone else. You may forget being loved, but you never forget loving, because it is the most central, the most important, the most fundamental of all activities, not being loved, but loving.

That’s what family gives us an intimate chance to do, in circumstances that may be very supportive or very painful, that we have the opportunity to give ourselves, to learn how to give ourselves to one another wisely and courageously and with tremendous forgiveness and deep acceptance.

If you learn that, you’ve learned everything that you need to know. If you learn everything else and you never find that out, you’ve missed what it is to be a human being, because human beings are called to be the people who do what God is. God is agape, and we get to enact it. That is the most extraordinary statement about being a human being that I know.
ON FAITH AND FAMILY

“If you want to bring happiness to the whole world, go home and love your family.”
—Saint Teresa of Calcutta

Summary

In a talk delivered to Boston College students, Father Michael Himes shares about the special season of his life in which he lived with his mother after his father died. Himes describes that while his mother was physically and mentally declining, she still retained an acute sense of what is important: loving and being loved. For Himes, his mother had lessons to teach him until the very end.

Questions for Conversation

• Catholicism proposes that the family is the “school of love.” In what ways has your family taught you how to love and be loved?
• What is the greatest lesson that a loved one has taught you?
• Have you had the experience of watching a loved one decline or pass away? What role did faith play during that time?
• What have you learned about God by being a part of a family?
SERVICE
Before leaving for El Salvador, I had set high expectations for how I would spend my time there. I had crafted in my mind images of helping those whom I had not yet met, and waited in hopeful anticipation for a transformative semester. I had come to hold a firm belief that service for the poor was an essential aspect of my Christian faith. Yet, I was unaware that I had an enormous lesson to learn about what it really means to be a disciple of Christ. The Salvadorans taught me the art of presence, and brought me to an understanding on the beauty of being.

I lived in El Salvador in the spring of my junior year of college and studied with the Casa de la Solidaridad program. The study abroad experience is uniquely structured – three days a week are spent in class while the other two days are spent accompanying an impoverished Salvadoran community. Every Monday and Wednesday two other students and I were led by our praxis site coordinator, Hector, up a volcano to a community called Las Nubes. The community is comprised of 24 homes, made up mostly of tierra (land), tin, and wire. The families do not have access to running water, electricity, or garbage collection. Despite the ever-present reality of extreme poverty, life in Las Nubes is simple and beautiful. Relationships are paramount, and conversations are held as sacred space where the Divine dwells.

We spent our first few weeks in Las Nubes going to each family’s home, introducing ourselves, and talking for hours over un cafecito. As we sat in the
hot Salvadorian sun drinking coffee, my mind drifted to thoughts about all of the things that needed to be done in this place that I was slowly learning to call my home. I could not be present with the very people who were with me in that moment because my heart was filled with an unnerving anxiousness and a grave frustration. Not only was I discouraged by my inability to fully comprehend the Salvadorans, but I had an unremitting desire to do something to fix the poverty that I was encountering daily. I began to carry around a small notebook and would fill the pages with plans for fundraising money for a new community center, or checklists of steps to urge the government to bring water to the community more often. With all that needed to be done in Las Nubes, I could not conceive any possible reason as to why we were just sitting around and talking. My mind and heart were overburdened with sights of extreme poverty, and I had succumbed to feeling powerless in the face of such systematic oppression.

Over the course of the first month or so, we developed a routine of stopping first at Nina Tancho’s home. Nina Tancho was about 80 years old, 4 feet tall, and had only one tooth that stuck out from her bottom gum. When we walked into her home on one particular Wednesday, Nina was sitting in a white plastic chair crying silently – her face buried in her hands. When I approached her to ask if she was okay, she did not look up. I distanced myself in discomfort and disappointment that I could not help her. Hector approached her and after whispering to each other for a few moments he suddenly got up and went into the house. He came back carrying a large plastic bottle filled with cooking oil. Hector reverently knelt beside her, poured the oil into his hands as if it were holy water, and with tender and loving compassion, started to gently massage the bottom of her right foot. Nina Tancho instantly began to scream and moan in agony. Without hesitating, I ran over and knelt beside her chair. I fought through the boundaries of discomfort that had once paralyzed me, and reached out to grab her hand. As her fingers tightened around mine, I was hit with the realization that in that moment, nothing separated us. I was not sitting from a distance thinking about her lack of health care, and writing down ways to fix it that seem like simple solutions from my own privileged perspective. As Hector slowly lowered her foot to the ground, Nina turned to me as she wiped the tears from her eyes and said, “Gracias por sostener mi mano (thank you for holding my hand).”

Those simple words transformed my experience in El Salvador. As Mary Oliver describes, this was the empathic ping that left me so in awe of how utterly human both of us were in that moment. Although I could have chosen from hundreds of stories that are still so vivid in my mind, this one instance in Las Nubes remains my greatest lesson on presence and the beauty of being with another. For so long, I was convinced that I needed to do something while I was in Las Nubes, when the truth of the matter is, I simply needed to be there – fully present, fully vulnerable, fully myself. Through this action of vulnerability, and of dwelling in the unknown, love became palpable. The times when I would feel useless still occurred throughout the rest of my semester. Yet, everyday when I showed up at my praxis site, I was loved and accepted without condition. And everyday, people who had no reason to love me, allowed me to humbly walk alongside them. That is the root of accompaniment—to walk with those who suffer, and maybe even to hold their hands along the way. We enter into solidarity when we break the boundaries of separation that keep us from this connection. And it is in this understanding, that we touch the heart of the Gospel. Jesus was not a man for others, he was one with them.

The power of that touch was the transforming point of my entire Salvadoran experience. By holding Nina Tancho’s hand while she was suffering, I became completely lost in her reality. I thought I knew the Gospel, but in that moment, I began to read it in a different way. Jesus went to the margins and stood there. That was how he transformed the world. And so, he calls us to do the same. His resurrection continues to remind us that although we can say that we are followers of Christ, we are unable to reach the core of his message until we stand where he once stood. By my presence I was able to bear witness with great joy and simplicity to this Good News that I believe in. Solidarity is when we realize that our salvation lies in the love of one another—there is infinite beauty in that realization.
Summary
Author Meg Stapleton Smith reflects on her study abroad experience in El Salvador, which included coursework and service within an impoverished community. Meg recounts her preoccupation with fixing the immediate, material problems the community members faced as well as feeling overwhelmed by the injustices that kept the community in poverty and which seemed impossible to change. Through a simple encounter with one member of the village, Meg learns that her most important mission was to offer a ministry of presence - simply being with someone in a time of acute suffering and offering her the friendship of Jesus.

Questions for Conversation
1. Have you ever accompanied someone in a difficult moment? What was it like? Did it feel like service, friendship, or both?
2. Have you ever done service in a community that is different from your own? Where was it and what did you do? Who did you meet and what did you learn?
3. If you haven't done service in another community, have you ever been in a neighborhood or place different from your hometown? What were the encounters with local people like? What did you learn about their experience? Were there points of connection?
4. Jesus invites us to serve people who are marginalized wherever we find them. This includes the sick, the hungry and thirsty, the poor, and many others. Is there a person or group of people you know of who needs your help and could use your presence? What can you do for them when you return home after Ever to Excel?
GATHERING PRAYER

Be With Us Today
St. Thomas More (1478-1535)

Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

For more information about Faith Feeds, visit bc.edu/c21faithfeeds

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