

## Friends

Paul Gruninger grew up in a small Swiss town close to the Austrian border in the early 1900's.

He was at best an average student who enjoyed soccer more than classes.

He served honorably but without distinction in the Swiss army in World War I, and after the war, took a teaching position in a local elementary school.

He went to church on Sundays and eventually married a fellow teacher, Alice.

At the urging of his mom, he took a better paying job at the local police station.

He was by all accounts, an ordinary, mid-level bureaucrat whose job required him to fill out reports and arrange security details for the occasional high profile visitor.

At the age of 47, in 1939, heading to work one morning, Mr. Gruninger's way is blocked by a uniformed junior police officer.

He's told his services are no longer necessary and he is barred from the police station.

There had been an investigation.

It seems that Mr. Gruninger was secretly altering documents for Jewish people so they might enter Switzerland and flee Nazi occupied Austria; entries the Swiss had forbidden a year earlier to Jews.

Mr. Gruninger, it seems, with a few strokes of the pen, predated passports to circumvent a law designed to keep Jewish refugees out, and with that pen, saved many hundreds of lives.

Friendship with those who were once strangers, sometimes at great personal cost, it is that friendship that is driving our friend and mentor Peter this morning.

Peter, once frightened Peter, once denier Peter, the Peter who was reduced to a chewed out Satan and told to back off; is now Peter the amazed, Peter the awestruck, Peter the grateful.

The Holy Spirit is on the move this morning and Peter finds himself surrounded by, of all people, a Roman soldier's family; gentiles all, occupiers all, and Peter stands in jaw dropped wonder as that same Spirit comes into the home of these unclean, unwanted, people, invading their lives, their hearts, their minds.

All of which makes Peter take a huge step back and, caught up in that same Spirit, he suddenly comes to understand that God is erasing all of the lines that humanity has drawn and God is knocking down all of the walls of separation that we have built up and God is showing in unmistakable ways that all human beings are brothers and sisters.

"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

By asking the question, Peter also answers it.

Immediately, they are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter's mind is blown.

And people he never would have thought in a million years to be his friends, are, today, his friends.

Shortly after being barred from the police station, Paul Gruninger was fired from his job and then charged with violations of law.

The authorities spread rumors in the town that Mr. Gruninger had demanded sexual favors and money from the people he helped escape.

Never mind that later interviews with those he helped proved those rumors to be vicious lies; dishonored and disgraced, Mr. Gruninger sold umbrellas and animal feed for the rest of his life.

He died in 1972, in poverty.

Jesus today tells us that the friendship he offers isn't cheap.

Instead, the friendship of Jesus; the friendship he invites us all to have with one another; a friendship rooted in obedience to the God who calls us each by name, that friendship brings with it a laying down of our lives.

Perhaps not literally, although there are many people of faith in the world today who are killed or persecuted because of faith.

And one wonders what even our own government would do if we Christians really began to live out our faith by refusing to participate in the economy and culture of violence; by honoring life from womb to the grave; or by insisting that the bounty of God's creation be shared, and shared, and shared.

For now, and for us, the laying down of life most usually means making the costly choice to forgive the person who hurt me, to be reconciled with the brother or sister who too often seems to be just plain trouble, or perhaps getting dirty when so many insist that 'cleanliness is next to godliness'.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another **as I have loved you.**"

Jesus' love always challenges, always stretches who we think we are, who we think we can become; it's a love that isn't for sissies; it isn't for the faint of heart; yet paradoxically, it is for the quiet, for the unassuming, for the humble.

Mr. Gruninger seems to be one of those people.

While there was little to distinguish Mr. Gruninger, (his own daughter struggled to explain her father's actions); yet he quietly saved the lives of hundreds of people at great personal risk; a risk that ripened into punishment; a risk that caused the rest of his life to be lived as one shunned; one scorned.

Why did he do it?

The thing is, you probably can't talk yourself into being that kind of a friend.

It really isn't a decision of the conscious will, but is more a consequence of who you are.

One author says:

"Whether people serve themselves or serve others is not in their power to choose. This is decided wholly in terms of the world in which they think they live....In New Testament terms, they live or die according to the king that holds them and the kingdom to which they belong." Arthur McGill.

Today, on this sixth Sunday of Easter, Jesus invites you and me into the kingdom of his friendship.

This kingdom exists in stark opposition to the kingdom of consumers and celebrities and military power; the world that says "follow the rules," even if those rules kill, shun or hoard; such is the world we are lured into each and every day.

Jesus offers a different way.

If you say yes, get ready for a ride; you only need to ask Peter about upended expectations; overturned beliefs; all leading to the shocking revelation that God loves everyone --- , and our efforts to categorize and stigmatize and rationalize are for naught.

As you probably know, the origins of Mothers' Day, is not with the candy and Hallmark card industry.

Julia Ward Howe, the woman who penned The Battle Hymn of the Republic, founded Mothers' Day in the US.

Howe had become so distraught by the death and carnage of the Civil War that she called on Mother's to come together and protest what she saw as the futility of their Sons killing the Sons of other Mothers.

She called for an international Mother's Day celebrating peace and motherhood.

"Arise, then, women of this day!  
Arise all women who have hearts,  
Whether your baptism be that of water or of tears  
Say firmly:

"We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies,  
Our husbands shall not come to us reeking of carnage,  
For caresses and applause.  
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn  
All that we have been able to teach them of

charity, mercy and patience.

"We women of one country  
Will be too tender of those of another country  
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with  
Our own. It says, "Disarm, Disarm!"  
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice!  
Blood does not wipe out dishonor  
Nor violence indicate possession.  
As men have often forsaken the plow and the anvil at the  
summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of  
home  
For a great and earnest day of counsel.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the  
dead.

Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the  
means Whereby the great human family can live in peace,  
Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar,  
But of God."

Such is the costly friendship to which Jesus calls us.

Yet, we don't need to go back to Mrs. Howe's civil war or Paul  
Gruninger's World War II to see the problem.

We see it today as continued discrimination against same sex  
couples; with churches often leading the way in preserving that  
discrimination.

We see it in the life and sacrifice of Joseph Darby, the quietly  
brave soldier who was aghast at the abuses at Abu Grave prison in  
Iraq; and who exposed those abuses; and who was himself then

ostracized by his community and terrified with death threats against himself and his family.

We give Presidential medals of freedom to brave foreigners who stand up to oppression; but we are usually not so generous with those who point out the misdeeds of our own power brokers.

It is by water and blood that we are saved; always there is blood.

Mr. Gruninger and his wife were buried together near their home town.

“Years later, a plaque was placed at the foot of Paul’s grave.

It reads: ‘Paul Gruninger saved hundreds of refugees in 1938/39.’”

“At his funeral, a choir sang ... and a Rabbi read from the Talmud: ‘He who saves a single life, saves the whole world.’” T. Long, *Christian Century*, 5/2/12 at 47.

To become a friend of Jesus, and through Jesus, to become friends with each other and with the wider world, it seems we need to enter into a whole new world, a whole new way of encountering life; of encountering each other; and once we do, we too can become a friend like Paul Gruninger, like St. Peter, like Mrs. Howe, like Joseph Darby, and yes, like Jesus.