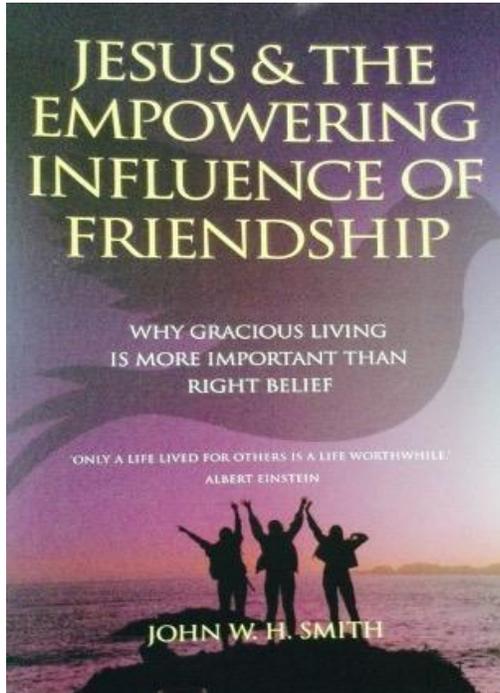


PCNV MEETING APRIL 25, 2021

SPEAKER: Rev John W H Smith

Jesus and the Transforming Power of Friendship



The primary aim of this presentation is to explore how our values- deficient western culture might benefit from the values displayed in the life of the Galilean sage Jesus of Nazareth, who was able to empower and transform the lives of those he met. The importance of friendship cannot be underestimated in the wellbeing and respect of everyone we have contact with, because relationships are fundamental for our own personal sense of identity and we are who we are through the friendships we form.

Friendships that value us as worthwhile human beings will bring us to a sense of wholeness. Living in community we discover that friendships grow when we invite each other into a process of intimacy, which affirms our need for belonging, particularly for those experiencing aloneness. Friendships invoke feelings, they also offer us the opportunity to experience empathy, which encourages us to respond with compassion for those we befriend.

Followers and Friends

In an examination of the life of Jesus of Nazareth we discover that the ethical values he holds are expressed not only in his personal friendships, but also in his questioning of authorities, be they political or religious. For those who are committed to a relationship with Jesus this is important to understand, because it means that at times, we will have to challenge authorities. For those who are who are committed to a relationship with Jesus this is important to understand because, it means that at times we will have to challenge authorities if their actions or policies disregard the importance of caring and compassionate relationships. If we accept that the personal transforming power of Jesus comes from his ability to form close personal relationships, then as followers of his way we must respond compassionately to those people with whom we engage.

The defining attribute of faith communities that embrace the values of their friend Jesus will be their ability to share and support the development of these personal values with each other. Within such a Jesus community, the role of each individual will include advocating on behalf of people who have been disadvantaged by the dominant values of the wider society. In this way we will be able to ensure that those who have been disadvantaged will receive the justice and inclusion to which they are entitled.

In an examination of the gospel narratives and other recently recovered writings we discover that Jesus had a belief in the inherent goodness of the people he encountered and befriended. The Jesus Seminar in analyzing the “voiceprint” of Jesus and placing his words and actions in their historical matrix has given us a glimpse of his historical figure. People were attracted to Jesus because he made them feel worthwhile, included and valued.

We can discern Jesus’ personal values demonstrated in the gospels through his treatment of women as equals to his male followers. Women were an integral component of Jesus’ entourage as we read, for example in Luke 8: 1-3: “The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities.”

One such story in which we see Jesus’ response to people seeking healing involved a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. The story begins with Jesus walking with one of the elders of the synagogue, a man named Jairus a leader in the community. They are heading to his house because his daughter is sick, and Jesus has been asked to heal her. On their journey they are surrounded by a large crowd and as these people begin to press in Jesus experiences a special contact by a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. As a result of the woman’s touch Jesus stops what he is doing to respond to the woman’s need, and while he is speaking to her, he hears of the child’s death. Undeterred he continues to the house of Jairus and announces that the girl is not dead but sleeping and he recommends she be given food.

Keeping in mind that Jesus had a reputation for sharing meals and time with all comers including unattached women, his direct response to this woman would not have been considered out of character. In reality Jesus condemned the world of exclusion, because he did not condemn the woman for her actions. His acceptance of her was demonstrated by his use of the term “daughter”. His words affirm that the blood flow did not make her unclean.

Then there is the story of a woman who comes uninvited to the house of Simon the Pharisee, bringing with her an expensive jar of perfumed ointment (Luke 16 – 50). Jesus in the custom of the day, was reclining on the cushions at the banquet. Hence, she approached him from behind and begins to anoint his feet with the ointment and her tears. Not only does she dry his feet with her hair, but she also kisses them.

Jesus understood the woman’s need for acceptance; she was seeking recognition from a person she respected and in return she was welcomed with dignity as well as respect. Note Jesus words, “she has shown great love” or “She has done something beautiful”. Jesus is able to accept what this woman offers as a way of seeking connection without condemning her past behavior. He does not say, “Depart from me you wicked temptress, because you are evil, and your soul shall rot in hell for the sins you have committed.”

We have another story preserved in some ancient manuscripts of the gospel of John (8:3-11) and sometimes in Luke. In this orphan tradition, which is not preserved in the oldest manuscripts of either gospel, Jesus was urged both to judge a woman and also to approve of her public execution by stoning. The authorities were trying to trap Jesus, based on his response to a poor woman

who was caught in the act of adultery. The authorities saw it as their chance to stone a woman to death for adultery and also to be able to charge Jesus with religious disloyalty.

Jesus' response is compassionate. He bends forward and begins to trace something on the ground for the woman's eyes only. Then he challenges those gathered, regarding who has the moral right to cast the first stone. If most of those gathered were men, then maybe they were confronted by Jesus' challenge in such a way that made them realize that it is men who are largely responsible for sexual crimes. Slowly they all moved away leaving Jesus alone with the woman.

Jesus was offering a new understanding of God as one who is not judgmental but compassionate. This a very radical message. Jesus addresses this woman tenderly by calling her "woman". Then he asked if there was anyone left to condemn her and she replied "No one". Jesus realized that this woman needed reassurance and not condemnation, so he replies, "Neither do I condemn you". In today's world in which women are treated so violently this is really a radical message.

In an examination of the gospel narratives and other recently-recovered sacred writings we discover that Jesus had a belief in the inherent goodness of the people he encountered and befriended. The Jesus Seminar – in analyzing the voiceprint" of Jesus and placing his words and actions in their historical matrix- have given us a glimpse. People were attracted to Jesus because he made them feel worthwhile, included and valued.

In John 13:34-35 Jesus is portrayed as giving a different kind of "Great Commission" that we discover in Matthew 28:19-20 because here John has Jesus say, I give you a new commandment, "That you love one another, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will recognize you as my followers if you love one another" For the Johannine followers of Jesus, authentic friendship expressed in mutual affection is the distinctive hallmark of both their identity and their mission: the followers of Jesus are to love others in the same Spirit as Jesus himself practiced. We find similar exhortations to compassionate solidarity even with opponents and occupying military powers in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:38-48), while the two great commandments passage (Mark 12:29-31 and parallels) these put loving others on a par with devotion to God.

In Luke 10:30-35 we have the classic story of a compassionate "Good Samaritan". The attitudes and actions of this despised outsider illuminate the heart of the gospel message. The "Good Samaritan's compassion assists us to understand in practical terms the meaning of Jesus message.

Elsewhere in the gospels we see that the distinctive nature of the Jesus movement was to name the presence of the kingdom: to identify God's active presence and to invite everyone to collaborate with God's program of compassionate friendship.

The defining attribute of faith communities that embrace the values of their friend Jesus will be their ability to share and support the development of these personal values with each other.

Within such a Jesus community, the role of each individual will include advocating on behalf of people who have been disadvantaged by the dominant values of the wider society. In this way we will be able to ensure that those who have been disadvantaged will receive the justice and inclusion to which they are entitled. personal relationships, then as followers of his way we too must respond compassionately to those with whom we engage.

If we understand Jesus of Nazareth to proclaim a positive inclusive, loving God, then how should we respond and how should we act when confronted with a needy situation? The story of the Samaritan challenges us to think more deeply about the contours of compassionate friendship, even for strangers from groups who discriminate against us. The story is presented as a response to the question. "Who is my neighbor?" While often seen as a model for compassionate action towards others in need, it can also be heard as an invitation to rethink the way of people from whom we ourselves would accept compassionate friendship. As followers and friends of Jesus, we are called not just to offer friendship to others but to accept friendship from others; even from people whose compassionate solidarity with us we might prefer to decline.

It is important to note the long description that is given to the actions of the Samaritan which is greater than any other elements of the story. Great care has been taken to describe the goodness of the Samaritan to the hearers because they would be skeptical. The greatest emphasis is on the doer not what is done.

Jesus does not simply make it a means or passage to the love of God. We have to love the own person for their own sake, not because it is a condition for loving God. In this story the Samaritan responds to the person who has been beaten and robbed, simply because this person is in need.

We are told, the Samaritan binds up the victim's wounds. He alleviates his pain. He sets the sets the injured man on his beast and brings him to an inn. He leaves him in the care of the innkeeper. After paying for the initial expenses, he promises to make good any further expense when he comes back that way. Compassionate friendship without limits is on display.

Jesus emotional reaction to the death of Lazarus and his friendship with Mary and Martha is found in John 11:35-36. The story portrays Jesus standing at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. As Jesus began to weep the Jewish crowd watching him closely observes, "See how he loved him". Crying at the death of a friend suggests that Jesus is resolving the grief he experienced with the loss of a loved one and expressing his emotional attachment to friends. This story illustrates that Jesus' friendships were not built purely on social and physical contact but also on emotional bonding. Jesus would have personally experienced the pain and suffering of his friends.

In another classic episode, Jesus indicated how close his own personal relationships are with his friends and disciples. In Matthew 12:46-50 while Jesus was speaking to the crowds with his disciples, his mother and brothers were standing outside waiting to speak with him. When someone came to Jesus and told him this, Jesus replied;

“Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples he said, “Here are my mother and brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, is my brother, sister and mother.”

This response indicates the closeness of the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. They were his authentic family. Here we see Jesus in a kinship relationship with friends.

Jesus sense of solidarity with the poor and needy is seen even more vividly in the parable of the Day of Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46) In that passage Jesus explains to his disciples that he identifies with all who are suffering, be it people without food or clothing, the sick or those in prison. To help them is to be compassionate towards Jesus, to ignore them is to overlook him.

There are many values that underpin positive growth promoting friendships such as compassion, integrity, empathy, perseverance, empathy and humility. The core value as portrayed by Jesus was the value of compassion, which may be defined as a feeling of distress and pity for the suffering and the desire to alleviate them. One way to understand the mission of Jesus is that he practiced an outlook of abundance, as part of his kingdom of God message. “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). In Jesus we can see a life grounded in a commitment to freeing people to love wastefully beyond their boundaries and their fears; regardless of race, ethnicity or gender.

Did the words and actions of Jesus convey his emotions? Yes when he cried at the death of a friend and again when he reached out to touch people who were unclean to welcome them with terms of endearment. Jesus made people aware of their worth, by affirming that the spirit of sacred energy was within them and through recognizing and drawing on this power they could accept themselves as whole in the eyes of the God Spirit. Jesus offered a “brokerless realm” in that people did not require a broker to communicate with God, since they were able to personally access this Sacred Spirit. As Jesus explained, the kingdom was within them.

The distinctive Greek phrase – *basil tou theou* – seems to have been at heart of Jesus’ own sense of what he was doing and what it might mean to his audience. However, the traditional English translation as “kingdom of God” may not properly reflect what Jesus meant. Rather than a spiritual empire with sacred authority coming from above, Jesus may have been reflecting an ancient Aramaic concept of kingship (*malkuta*) as mutual empowerment. If these scholars who think that Jesus’ native tongue was Aramaic are correct, then this core concept at the heart of his mission denoted a concept of mutual empowerment, a realm of radical inclusion and a community of radical equality where each has the power to engage with the sacred spiritual energy we call God.

This understanding fits well with John Domonic Crossan’s proposal that the kingdom promoted by Jesus was in reality a “companionship of empowerment”. When Jesus called people to “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matt 6:33) he was inviting them to share in that companionship of empowerment. In this community of friends, we will find that it is relational activities which truly liberate, nurture and lead us to wholeness.

It is not only in the words of Jesus, but also in his actions that we understand the importance of the personal response to others. The stranger was not simply tolerated but respected and welcomed at the table. Perhaps it is time for us all to reclaim the message of Jesus as opposed to the message of “Churchianity”. This can require dispensing with the hierarchical images of the divine and substituting our human capacity for compassion to all. In doing that we reveal the spirit of God within all people as Jesus did with his friends. Then the spirit of the sacred energy we call God will be revealed in the way we care for each other.

Compassionate Friendship

How then did Jesus display the value of compassion? We need first to recognize that compassionate love is counter culture because it creates upheavals in the way we understand ourselves, others and the world around us. Also, while compassion does not alleviate suffering, it does transform our engagement with suffering because it helps us experience what injustice really feels like.

Compassion signifies standing in solidarity with another’s suffering, feeling within ourselves something of the others pain and trauma. The English definition of compassion as a noun means to suffer together with. As Karen Armstrong has written. “Despite various nuances of the word compassion it is the most outstanding unifying force among the world’s religions. It is the active living out of the universal desire to love unconditionally.”

In her “Charter of Compassion” Armstrong concludes that compassion is essential to human relationships as it fulfills our humanity. For Armstrong compassion is the path to enlightenment. It is indispensable in the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community. This understanding of compassion denotes a social power that underpins harmony, solidarity, and a non-violent power for healing and peace.

This force is also a political value that can foster economic and structural justice. However, most importantly Armstrong’s definition of compassion as a verb reinforces “inclusiveness”. If this form of compassion were released freely into our world then it would most likely remove or at least alleviate the majority of the social evils that we are currently experiencing.

One reason this has not occurred is because so often the feelings of compassion do not translate into practical action as they did in the life, words and actions of Jesus the Galilean sage. In the gospels compassion denotes a great deal more than simply feelings or emotion. Compassion in the New Testament is, in reality, a bold subversive claim for justice, liberation and empowerment.

In gospel terms, compassion is not simply a feeling of mercy or pity because these can evoke a patronizing concern rather than a commitment to action. The Greek word used in the gospels is ‘splangnezomai’, which literally means, “being moved from the depth of one’s bowels.” This term then is about the quality of an active response to rectify the wrong being felt or perceived , and this comes as a result of an inner enlightenment which seeks empowerment as a resolution to human suffering. In reality it is a pursuit of justice.

In the New Testament, “compassion” occurs seventeen times and is applied to Jesus on eight occasions. When the term is applied to Jesus it is always as a verb and never a noun. In other words, for Jesus compassion was not simply a feeling of pity but action to address a wrong. Compassion then is about what a person feels compelled to do, and not only the concern they may feel.

This understanding of compassion by Jesus is summarized in Luke 6:36 “Be compassionate as your Father God is compassionate”. This call from Jesus goes beyond the priestly exhortation in Leviticus 19:2 “You shall be holy for the Lord your God am holy”. For Jesus compassion is more important than purity. A similar point is implicit in the parable of the Samaritan as well as the many instances of Jesus violating the Sabbath.

Jesus’ emphasis on compassion rather than purity which was such a feature of Second Temple Judaism. We see this in the graphic episode of the woman who washes Jesus feet with her tears.

That story in one form or another is recorded in the four canonical gospels Matt 26:6-23; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:16-50; John 12: 1-8. Each version of this story has its own particular emphasis regarding the place, the people present, and the particular moment in Jesus’ ministry. Whether the woman was a local prostitute or Mary (the sister of Lazarus), the act of kindness was the same and the response from Jesus was the same. To some extent so was the reaction from the observers, as they dismiss this act of love. The values of Jesus encourage us to accept and embrace each other and to share in open commensality, not only our food, but also ourselves.

A World without real friends

In our world at this time there are many issues which demonstrate the value of genuine friendships and authentic social connection. The world is currently facing a major humanitarian crisis according to the Global Report on Food Crisis 2020.

There are now 183 million people in 47 countries, classified as being in stressed conditions and at risk of slipping into crisis. What is a major concern is that the food insecurity forecasts for 2020 were produced before COVID19 became a pandemic. They do not take into account its likely impact on countries facing food crisis.

Personal violence and especially violence against women are a further major concern in many different societies. Family domestic and sexual violence is a major health and welfare issue. It affects people of all ages and from all backgrounds, but mainly women and children. A June 2019 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare explored the impact of family, domestic and sexual violence among vulnerable groups found that one woman was killed every nine days and one man by a partner every 29 days by a partner between 2014 and 2016. They also reported on the Personal Safety Findings of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 estimated 2.2 million

adults have been victims of physical and sexual violence from a partner. Further that 1 in 2 women and 1 in 4 men have been sexually harassed and 1 in 6 women have experienced stalking.

Over a twelve month period in 2018 on average, a current or former partner killed one woman each week in Australia. These statistics have much wider implications. Domestic and family violence is the principle cause of homelessness for women and their children. It also contributes significantly to high levels of psychological stress. Violence against women is even higher among indigenous women who are thirty-five times more likely to be hospitalized for family violence than the wider female populations.

Another social evil that creates concerns in Australia and globally is economic inequality. At a time when wages have not increased for the longest period on record and the cost of living continues to increase, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. Not only have wages not increased, but also in some cases staff have not been paid the legal rate of wages.

As a result of this income inequality, many families are struggling to cope with rising energy prices, often by going without food in order to pay their energy bills. Foodbank Australia is Australia's largest food relief organization supporting the frontline charities who are feeding vulnerable Australians. It provides more than 70% of the food rescued for hunger relief. In October each year the CEO Brianna Carey releases the "Food Hunger Report", which examines food poverty around Australia over the previous twelve months. Their 2017 study reported that one in five children in Australia live in a food-insecure household, and that one in three parents (32%) say that their children do not have enough to eat. Many parents (9 out of 10) in this study are going without meals to feed their children, and this is occurring on a weekly basis.

Apart from the physical health implications of a diet imbalance, food security reduces psychological stress in families. It also encourages positive, healthy relationships. People who feel secure are more likely to reach out with love for others.

The inequality in the distribution of wealth has also led to the rising problem of homelessness. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that more than 116,000 people were experiencing homelessness in Australia on the census night in 2016. That is 50 homeless persons per 10,000 people.

Another major social evil, which appears to be on the rise, is racial hatred. Racism takes many forms and can happen anywhere. It includes prejudice, discrimination or hatred directed at someone because of the color of their skin, ethnicity or national origin.

One of the most significant factors in the rise of racism is fear based on ignorance. Fear of the unknown can cause anxiety, which leads to defensive reactions. This was recognized even in ancient times. "Ignorance dissolves when one gains knowledge of another." Through personal involvement, attitudes can change."

Research by the Australian Human Rights Commission indicates that as many as 20% of Australia's population experienced racial discrimination in 2019. Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islanders, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds, experience racial abuse more frequently than others. We need to realise that we share a common humanity with all people. Another concern is the support by some politicians for people who propagate hate speech – such as British journalist Milo Yiannopoulos. Extreme and at times irrational views are deliberately designed to incite neo-Nazis and misogynists to violence, through his tirades against women, indigenous and Muslims.

Moira Rayner, barrister and writer has stated:

“The people of ‘Australasia’ are at a crossroads. If we sow the seeds of hate, through dog whistling and hate speech, we will reap the consequences. It’s time to rebuild our society, otherwise we will tear ourselves apart.”

Social evils such as these stem from the very values we hold individually and jointly. We need to consider the importance of encouraging a different set of values, such as those we find in the words and actions of the sage Jesus of Nazareth. It is the acknowledgement of these values that underpin supportive personal relationships. This needs to be affirmed if we are to reduce the impact of the many social evils in our society today.

A Society of Friends

The message of Jesus as portrayed by his words and actions could resolve and prevent the social evils currently plaguing our society. How can those who identify as friends of Jesus communicate this message more widely?

We have witnessed in Australasia over the last two decades a movement of people describing themselves as “Progressive Christians”. They are seeking contact with people of similar interests to explore the relevance of this emerging scholarship for faith and practice. Many of these people continue as members of their traditional faith community, but they are seeking a deeper understanding of the Jesus message through relationships within a society of friends.

In 2012 I conducted a grassroots research into these groups in Australia and New Zealand. I concluded that the “principle strength of these groups is that they are vibrant discussion groups, exploring contemporary scholarship in a safe open and inclusive environment.” These groups were providing an atmosphere where nothing is taboo, where hostility and ridicule is not tolerated, and where open and frank exchange of ideas is encouraged. Many members of these groups developed personal support for each other, which in many cases evolved into close friendships.

Through this research we discovered that the majority of the groups had been informally established, with no agreed structure and, of course no formal national or state registration. People who were familiar with the new biblical scholarship surrounding the historical Jesus usually organised these groups, and in most cases there was no defined leader. It was left to participants to take turns at conducting the meetings. Do these groups provide us with an example of how a future network committed to transforming the world with the compassionate values of Jesus can be formed and activated?

Australian Bureau of Statistics regarding the religious beliefs of Australians shows that regular participation in the life of Christianity had been reduced to approximately 5% of the total population. In a presentation to the Progressive Christian Network of Victoria, Professor Gary Bouma reported that 52% of teenagers claim no religion, while- most importantly – 83% claimed that they lived ethically without religion. It can be concluded that the average Australian has written off the church and religion in general. The hangover of a religious past, which lacked any evidence-based understanding of our world and the way to engage personally with each other, appears to have no relevance in how to live in the twenty-first century.

It is possible that small groups such as those developed by people who call themselves “Progressive Christians” can be a way ahead for the followers of the Galilean sage.

Future communities of people who identify as “friends of the historical Jesus” will need to prioritise the importance of sharing time together in conversations over meals. They will acknowledge that the spirituality with which they were born is the ultimate force that binds them to their world, and which encourages them to love not only all human beings but all of creation.

Now Jesus communities will need to gather and share with each other, because they are yearning to connect and draw upon the sacred source of energy which surrounds us. Most importantly the members of these groups must be prepared at times to practice compassionate friendship for one another, particularly in times of distress. This will also require an ability to be openly honest about one’s feelings.

These groups will be communities where everyone is welcomed, accepted, supported. They will encourage their members to be actively involved in the needs of the wider community. This may at times include standing in solidarity with those seeking justice, freedom and healing. At times it will require the leaders of these groups to challenge authorities, be they religious, political or cultural.

Conclusion

My research indicates that resolving the damaging worldwide social problems – whether violence towards women, racism, cultural extremism, or endemic economic inequality – cannot simply be achieved by our political systems or the dominant forms of contemporary Christianity. Further, it is apparent that the root cause of oppression, violence and domination is primarily the lack of compassion. The way forward is for each and every one of us to be more compassionate. It is only when we commit ourselves to the values of loving care – authentic friendship – that we can heal the world.

This can be achieved when we embrace the example of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. He showed us through his words and actions, that there are many things more important than fame, money, power and ideology. What matters most are the personal values of compassion, love, and respect that we find in our genuine friendships. Jesus embodied a more compassionate way of

responding to the reality of life. The way of Jesus requires us to be humane as we strive together to alleviate human suffering. To be humane is to live the abundant life that Jesus envisaged, and this requires us to live by the values which Jesus espoused.

It is appropriate to conclude that significant social change can be wrought through the empowering nature of friendship. It is also important to realise that need not require a major systemic restructuring to begin with because it is within the power of small groups to effect significant social change.

Since personal relationships are a transforming influence then as companions of Jesus, the sage of Nazareth, we can use our personal relationship skills to create a more inclusive and caring community. It is also important to accept that to be successful there will be times when we need to operate subversively. This may also require us to be bold in challenging the current expressions of normative Christianity as well as engaging in non-violent civil disobedience to secure political action to redress social injustice.

Small groups that are committed to the ethical values and way of life of the historical compassionate Jesus, will be catalysts for the renewing of our world. The evidence as presented here is clear, that the world of today is in desperate need of healing and will only be transformed through acts of kindness and compassionate friendship.

John W H Smith