

**To Become Life-Long Friends:
A Sermon Delivered at the Marriage
of John Thatamanil and Kate Newman
at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery,
New York City, on June 30, 2018**



I am honored, beyond words, to be invited to offer this sermon at your wedding today. John, you are a dear and trusted friend and scholarly colleague for almost three decades, and I am grateful and delighted for Kate as a friend and sister. Today you seal your love by entering into the relationship of marriage. Your beautiful Christian ceremony is grounded in the conviction that marriage is sacred. Your love acknowledges, expresses, and is inspired by God whose nature, as the Gospel of John reminds us, is love. You affirm and celebrate God's reality and presence in you by your love for each other.

I believe that it is your understanding of the inclusive nature of this divine love and your vision of religious diversity as an asset for our collective flourishing that explain your extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented invitation to a Hindu brother to deliver the sermon at your wedding. Your hospitality inspires me, and I receive it with humility and gratitude. I pray that this love will continue to grow in its embrace and be one of the abiding fruits and gifts of your marriage. John writes and speaks eloquently from his heart about interreligious receptivity and the necessity of both sharing and receiving. It is in this spirit that I offer these words.

I share with you your understanding of marriage as a relationship with sacred and transcendent meaning. It is a commitment of love made to each other in the light of divine presence. In the Hindu marriage ceremony, this divine presence is represented by the light of a fire. Before this fire, a couple

takes seven steps together, referred to, in Sanskrit, as *saptapadi*. Before each step, they express a specific commitment for their journey together:

- Let us take the first step to become each other's nourishment
- Let us take the second step to become each other's strength
- Let us take the third step to become each other's wealth
- Let us take the fourth step to become each other's joy
- Let us take the fifth step to become each other's family
- Let us take the sixth step to become each other's delight in every
season
- Let us take the seventh step to become each other's lifelong friend

In each of the seven sentences of commitment, the verb is identical; it is *bhava*, "to become." The idea here is that to make a vow or to express a commitment for one's marriage does not signify that the meaning and challenges of the commitment are realized in its utterance. In the ceremony, you take the first step (*padi*) in a shared journey of unending becoming, of learning, of growth. Each day is a new step together in a deepening process of learning what it means to become a source of nourishment, strength, wealth, joy, family, delight, and friendship. The beauty of marital commitments is to be found in their ever-widening nature, in the excitement and joy of discovering new ways of understanding and expressing each one. You are committing yourselves to a journey of becoming in the intimate mutuality of your love.

In the Hindu tradition, the final step in a ritual or the final verse or line in a sacred text (*upasamhara*) is regarded as especially significant. It articulates the essence of the ritual or the text. In the seven steps of the Hindu marriage ceremony, the final step is taken for friendship with the words: "Let us take the seventh step to become each other's lifelong friend," in Sanskrit, *Sakha Saptapadi Bhava*. You marry to celebrate friendship and to grow in friendship. Friendship is the fertile soil that will nourish and strengthen you, renewing your daily joy and delight. In commending friendship to you, I am aware that I have not yet shared anything of its meaning. What do we aspire to become in friendship? To offer an answer, I turn to the medieval Hindu poet-saint Tulasidas who offered a fourfold characterization of the meaning of friendship.

First, according to Tulasidas, friends identify with each other's suffering and joy. Friendship is a profound empathy that enables you to experience

the sorrow of a friend and to strive actively for its healing. In fact, he added that the suffering of the other, however small, is always seen as mountain-like in the eyes of a friend. The opposite of friendship is indifference, described by Pope Francis as “the great sickness of our time . . . a virus that paralyzes, rendering us lethargic and insensitive, a disease that eats away at the very heart of religious fervor, giving rise to a new and deeply sad paganism: *the paganism of indifference*.” Do not allow indifference to infect your friendship. May your hearts throb together in joy and in pain.

Second, friends care about and are committed to each other’s moral health. Friendship includes mutual ethical responsibilities; friends strive to become virtue-partners. The Sanskrit expression is *sahadharmachari*, a companion on the path of goodness. Become *dharma*-companions, supporting, questioning, debating, and inspiring each other in the pursuit of justice and goodness.

Third, friends trust each other. They give themselves with vulnerability, knowing that their anxieties, fears, and flaws will never be used to humiliate or degrade them publicly or privately. They are protective of each other’s fragility, holding dearly and tenderly the friend’s heart in their own hearts. What a rare and precious gift is such trust! Cherish and delight in it, recognizing it as an extraordinary blessing.

Fourth, friends are generous. According to Tulasidas, friends give and receive, never calculating whether they will receive equal value for what is given. There are times when one may give more and receive less, or when one may receive more and give less. Friends do not keep records of giving and receiving; they give and receive from the fullness of friendship. In fact, friends give even more when a friend is incapable of giving. Be generous in giving and, just as important, open and humble in receiving.

The friendship that I commend to you is a divine virtue. Even as the “fullness of God,” described in Eph. 3:19, is given to each of us without ever being depleted, the plenitude of friendship, like love, is never diminished by its sharing. The boundless gift of friendship in its capacity to include reflects its roots in the nature of the divine who is the lover and friend of all and who excludes no one. Friendship is shared in the unique and tender intimacy between two human beings in marriage, but its true nature as a divine virtue is realized only when the loving warmth of your relationship, more potent and creative because of your union, radiates outward in an ever-growing circle of embrace.

Today, through the sacrament of marriage, you commit yourselves to becoming life-long friends and lovers. By choosing, however, to see the meaning of your marriage from the perspective of the One who is ultimate, who is the source, support, goal, and lover of all, you commit yourselves to becoming friends and lovers of the world. You commit yourselves to making the blessing of your marriage a blessing for the world—to making the gift that you are to each other a gift to the world.

In Sanskrit, the word for friend is *mitra*; its verbal root meaning is “to care for” or “to protect.” In Hindu mythology, Mitra also is a *deva*, divine being, associated with light, wisdom, abundance, and happiness. A friend of the world, a *lokamitra*, is one who cares for the world in its entirety—not just one country, one religion, one ethnic community, or one species. She is devoted to the world’s abundance and delights in its flourishing. Our divided world desperately needs *lokamitras*, persons like both of you, who are gifted with wisdom and compassion and who love it passionately.

I pray, Kate and John, that the God of us all blesses you today and always. May you become life-long friends of each other and of our world.

Anantanand Rambachan
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Collective Flourishing: A Response to Anantanand Rambachan



While I (Kate) sat, across the continent from my Canadian home in an Episcopal church on my wedding day, with my chosen one beside me, I was engaged in a ritual that invited us to comprehend love in its divine depth. I was becoming married, engaging in sacrament, participating in divine love, hunting transformation.

In order to help us appreciate the meaning of this ritual, we had called on our Hindu brother and invited him to give the wedding sermon in our

church, St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery, the oldest site of continuous worship in Manhattan. Anantanand Rambachan, a Hindu theologian speaking in a Christian ceremony,¹ stood amid vapors of frankincense in the ninety-one-degree heat of downtown Manhattan (Lenape, *Manahatta*: island of many hills) and spoke of the possibility of our "collective flourishing."

His was not only a call to my beloved and me; it was also a call to our collective identity as religious communities. Rambachan was speaking to several collectives. On that day, it would mean, first, the newly emergent collectivity of the married couple. Second, it would extend to the assembly of the gathered congregation. Now, on this page, the collectivity addressed here includes readers who define their identity through interest in inter-religious engagement. In this context especially, what if we were to hear Rambachan's words anew as pertaining not only to marriage but also to relationships between people across religious traditions? We find ourselves hearing his words as directed not only to one couple but, instead, to all those who seek to live in interreligious friendship.

The inclusion of a Hindu theologian who offers his tradition's wisdom to a Christian couple enfleshes a possibility that we cannot help but hear in Rambachan's words. In a world wherein religious communities are inextricably wedded to each other, what if we dared to hear Rambachan's call to husband and wife as extending also to the mutual care, love, support, and friendship that religious communities are called to grant to each other? Together, communities of interreligious friends can support each other's flourishing. We can be living organisms that help one another to grow or develop in healthy and vigorous ways. Just as Rambachan has done for us by offering a sermon, we can offer one another divinely inspired words and so open the door to the new interreligious community of communities that we are becoming together.

But, is this a stretch too far? Surely, Rambachan is right to ask partners in a marriage to nourish each other, but can religious traditions nourish each other? Should they? Does the very notion that a Christian has something to give to Hindus or, as in this case, a Hindu to Christians, imply a deficiency in the one who receives? We who hear Rambachan's words say

¹We are grateful to the Rev. Anne Sawyer of St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery and to Bishop Andrew Dietsche for granting permission for our unusual request to have a Hindu theologian preach at a Christian wedding.

no, no more so than in a marriage. No thought of deficiency is implied in the notion that a wife has much to give a husband and *vice versa*—so, too, with our traditions and the work of interreligious giving and receiving.

Our traditions are constituted by their particularities even when we share symbols in common. Although we share the same symbol—in our wedding sermon, the symbol of fire came into play—the uses and meanings of the symbol are distinctive. This is one reason for our confidence that we have much with which to nourish each other. Christians, by and large, do not walk around fires. Hindus do. Nonetheless, fire is a precious symbol in Christian traditions also. Rambachan taught us that Hindus celebrate God’s presence in and as the fire. He evoked fire from the Hindu marriage tradition where it is likened to Sacred Love.

This prompts me to recollect the symbol of fire within Christian tradition and hope to consider how fire marks our relationship with the sacred and calls to mind encounter with the light of divine presence. In the New Testament, fire consumes, baptizes, and transforms; tongues of flame danced on the heads of the Apostles on Pentecost morning. It is eternal, unquenchable. Fire comforts, is brought by the Christ himself to the earth,² is kindled, and, finally, in the Gospel of John, the risen Christ lights a fire to nourish the disciples on the beach. Fire also exists in the Christian wedding ceremony as a candle and early on Easter morning. Similarity-in-difference, difference-in-similarity—these are the conditions for the possibility of mutual learning and transformation. If only difference, then recognition may prove difficult; if only similarity, then there would be little or nothing to learn.

During a Hindu wedding ceremony, the bride and groom take steps around a fire, seven to be precise. In what follows, I seek to suggest that every one of these seven steps, as interpreted by Rambachan, has something to teach not just wife and husband, but also the world’s religious traditions. In our diverse religious traditions, we express a commitment to multiple understandings of divinity. While grounded in our personal commitments to our home traditions, we seek further becoming. This process reveals dimensions of divinity we could not previously perceive. That is

²“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” (Lk. 12:49, N.R.S.V.).

precisely what interreligious giving and receiving promises: angles of vision and perspectives previously unimagined.

Working mutually—for the sake of justice, for the care of the earth, for protecting and nurturing our children—we can be each other's wealth and each other's joy. This wisdom of togetherness is our wealth, and so it becomes our joy. Living together uncovers new experiences and deepens our friendship. We will come to understand that, in our respective choices to orient our lives toward divinity, we are each other's family. The abundant joy that results overflows into celebration of new bonds as a family joined by marriage is bonded together.

The meaning of interreligious togetherness unfolds as we become. We can neither control nor predict the outcome. As a marriage is only inaugurated at the wedding ceremony, interreligious friendship requires at the outset only the first step of living alongside one another as we commit to the journey that we will take together. Over time, we become something new, something neither partner, neither tradition, could be in isolation. Interreligious friendship will nourish us as we allow ourselves to become what we aspire to be.

Interreligious friends care about one another, have responsibility for one another's good health, and are partners in virtue as we walk alongside each other on a peaceful path. As lovers of divinity, we support and encourage one another even as we question one another and, on occasion, debate. In this way, we pursue justice by attempting to embody divine witness. As we give ourselves to one another in vulnerability, sharing our understanding of divinity through word and action, we grow in trust.

To flourish collectively, Rambachan reminds us that we who witness to different visions of ultimate reality must not use one another's flaws to humiliate the other, publicly or privately. If we feel compelled to name another's flaws, we must speak in love. We must protect one another's fragility and hold one another dear.

The commitment to collective interreligious friendship is boundless; it is a calling to mutual protection and protection of our common home. It transforms us and makes us friends of the world; it calls us to recognize our earth as a shared environment that can be filled with abundance, happiness, and peace—but only through our shared commitment to its care. We must remember Rambachan's deepest call both to wedded couples and, now by our extension, to interreligious friendship. We remember that the

work of interreligious friendship cannot be confined to casting loving glances at each other. With mutual appreciation as a beginning and foundation, the partnership between traditions must find culmination in the vocation of becoming *lokamitras*, lovers of the world. This, then, is the question for married couples and interreligious friends alike: Has our bond, our spiritual kinship, borne fruit, the fruit of love for a world that so desperately needs our combined care?

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