

Sermon for Sunday, Jan. 21, 2018

Words of Encouragement ‘The People We Meet: Friends Along the Way’

My father used to say, ‘You’re lucky in this life to have even 1 or 2 real true friends.’ Have any of you ever heard that? ‘Real True friends.’ In my father’s world, true friendship was rare and unexpected. A gift that wasn’t guaranteed. A treasure even. A pearl of great price.

I wonder nowadays how many people would agree with my father? Like, only 1 or 2 friends? Really? Because friends are important. They are a safety net for us. Friends are like the family we get to choose rather than the family we were born into. They are social capital. Friends have even become something of a commodity if you will. Look at social media/Facebook encouraging us to add more and more ‘friends.’ I suspect that I’m kind of meager on that score with only 260 friends....what???

I can see my Dad shaking his head at that...

So we live in a time when even technology acknowledges that Friendship is important. Yes, Friendship is something that never seems to go out of style. Just ask Barbara Streisand **SLIDE**....People who need people...are the luckiest people. Or better yet, just read the Bible...God saw that Adam was lonely and created Eve to be his companion. Don’t worry about the biology or the sociology or anthropology of that story. I tell people, it’s a creation story that is more about God’s intentions than about science so let’s accept that the Bible tells us:
God made us to be in relationship with each other, yes? Back at the very beginning.

And the Garden of Eden, as described in Genesis, is a foretaste of Heaven (**SLIDE**) where these two people have companionship and rapport and friendship...not only with each other but also, they have unlimited access to God. *He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me that I am his own....* That’s the beauty of that first story of the Bible.

At the same time, the tragedy of that first story in the Bible—dare I say, the primary tragedy of life--is that after the beauty and goodness of creation comes loneliness and separation and disconnection. Something in us human beings just can’t stand it when the good times last too long. We just sometimes are compelled to mess it up.

While friendship doesn’t ever seem to go out of style...Loneliness in America is increasing over the last few decades. Did you know that some respected mental health experts believe that....

Loneliness is a growing health epidemic in this country. We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness, by some counts, have doubled since the 1980s.ⁱ

As recently as 2010, AARP (American Assoc of Retired People) did a survey of people over the age of 45. More than 3000 people responded. And 35% of them, scored in the 'chronically lonely' category, based on a questionnaire developed out of the U. of California LA. There is other research that suggests that the real number may well be higher.ⁱⁱ

Quote from a former US Surgeon General: Vitak Murthy. 'Loneliness and weak social connections are associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day and even greater than that associated with obesity....But we haven't focused nearly as much effort on strengthening connections between people as we have on curbing tobacco use or obesity. Loneliness is also associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety. At work, loneliness reduces task performance, limits creativity, and impairs other aspects of executive function such as reasoning and decision making. For our health and our work, it is imperative that we address the loneliness epidemic quickly.ⁱⁱⁱ

And what is the best antidote, cure for loneliness? Friends. Real, true friends. And we know how to do that, don't we? We are the lucky ones. Those of us who read the Bible and come to Worship. Because Jesus reminds us that we are custom made for friendship. And Jesus offers us friendship and teaches us about what friendship can look like.

Jesus is the best friend ever because he says/explains who he is and then he does and lives what he says. A dependable and trustworthy friend. Of course, the disciples didn't know that for sure at first.

Think about those first disciples...in the middle of a hot, sunny day on the shore of the sea of Galilee. Fishermen and smelly fishing boats up and down the beach. And trust me, fish in the hot sun smelled just as bad in the Bible as they do in the UP cuz we're not talking ice fishing or hobby fishing here. We're talking commercial, family business...have to catch a certain quota to sell at the market to feed the family and pay the bills kind of fishing.

Imagine the early morning catch...because good fishermen know that the fish move around more before the sun comes up...is already on its way to the market place. James and his brother John are mending the nets on Father Zebedee's boat.

Simon and his brother Andrew are probably knee deep out in the water, casting their net, hoping to add to their haul for the day.

This may have been just another day in the life for these fishermen or...or...anyone of these men could still be bothered by an argument with the wife the night before. Or been

kept awake all night by sick or crying children. Or maybe unmarried and lonely for a wife and a family. Old Father Zebedee could have been in a bad mood that day...he wasn't called 'Thunder' for nothing...James and John, the sons of 'Thunder' could be feeling his wrath.

Then along comes Jesus. Strolling along the shore. The itinerant preacher everyone was talking about...I trust that the grapevine in that area was humming with news of his message...'The kingdom is here! Change your life!'

And Jesus meets up with those four fishermen along the way, in the middle of their ordinary, everyday lives and says, 'Follow me. Come away from smelly fish and family dramas and job dissatisfaction and you will have an adventure beyond your wildest dreams. Your fishing will take on a whole new meaning in a whole different dimension. Instead of fishing the Sea of Galilee...you will fish the ocean of humanity...and I will call you friend.'

We can't know for sure which of those enticements were the motivating factor for those four men to leave their jobs and their families. But they had to know, that very first day they followed Jesus, they had to know that their lives were changing. They knew that something new was going on. They knew that Jesus was special and that they were attaching themselves to someone who knew way more than they did. But they didn't know, on that hot sunny day...that they were going to become friends with the Messiah, God himself who came to live in that time and that place. The friendship with Jesus came later.

Friendship with Jesus came to the disciples After miracles. And healings. And teachings. And arguments with the local religious authorities. After efforts to stay under the radar of the Roman government. And to stay out of the hands of the angry people who didn't like miracles and strangers. Friendship with Jesus was named and claimed after arguments about who was the greatest and After watching the storm subside and the fig tree droop and the lame walk and the mute talk and the blind see and the deaf hear. Such a variety of incredible experiences and then Jesus says...I call you friend. You're not a servant. You're not a student. Not a clerk or a biographer or an accountant for me, Jesus says. You are my friend.

Jesus chose those particular men, and Jesus chooses each and every single one of us because he sees something in each of us that is valuable and precious for the world. Something and somehow in which we, all of us, each of us, can be friends to each other and bear fruit and reduce the deadly loneliness that keeps creeping in. How's that for an adventure in living?

Think about the friends you have met along the way. The one or two or however many who are so dear and precious to you. Are they the ones that you have been through

adventures with? Maybe adventures in parenting? Or marriage? Or maybe through the rigors of military service? Or the challenges of college? Or maybe people who have shared the ups and downs of work...

The more stuff we go through with our friends, the more chances we have to stay loyal and to have each other's back. Because that's what Jesus says friendship is all about. To love one another. To put our lives on the line and to live our lives with and for each other. Not to give up and walk away. No...to hang together so we don't fall apart. Hard to do but that's exactly what makes life so much more rich and wonderful.

Yes, Jesus taught many lessons about friendship.

He taught us to trust him and that it's OK to leave the familiar behind and to walk into uncharted territory. And there we will find friendship with him and with others who trust him.

At the same time, Jesus, as our friend, reminds us to rest...like in this Jubilee year. Come away and be renewed, refreshed with prayer and time apart from the demands of the world. There we will find rest in him who calls us friend and we will meet others who are in need of rest as well.

Jesus gives us the hard work of loving our neighbors, not just our neighbors but loving our enemies. And the harder work of accepting persecution for doing the right thing that may make others mad.

At the same time, Jesus tells us not to worry about the future. The troubles of this day are sufficient until themselves.

Jesus teaches us that real friends, like he is, know the truth about us and love us anyway. And yes, our friend Jesus also challenges us to admit where we fall short. Like a true friend, he says don't be satisfied with falling short. Turn away from your old ways and follow the One who calls you friend and loves you.

Who among us **has** a friend like Jesus...who can and will do all of that? I think I do. One of my dear friends died this week and I think of his truth-telling. His not letting me get away with pretending everything is OK when it wasn't. His generosity of spirit as he watched me become close friends with his wife as he became quieter and more withdrawn and the cancer dug in deeper and deeper. The kindness they both showed me in coming to see me here in the UP

Commented [GH1]: e

Who among us **is** a friend like that with anyone? Yes, our most precious friendship is with Jesus but Jesus doesn't want us to stop there. He says take this friendship that I share with you and live it with those around you. You and you and you....Become a friend

who can and will love as Jesus loves. A friend who will Say what you'll do and do what we say. A friend who will love even when the other is being totally unlovable. No we aren't perfect but we can try and we are all capable of progress.

Jesus really wants us to know that our loneliness, the world's loneliness, can be remedied by making and being friends in the image of the friendship that he showed us. As Bob Marley says, Yes, Bob Marley. A Wild One and a Wise One. *Live for yourself, and you will live in vain. Live for others, and you will live again.* That's what Jesus did. Now it's our turn... Thank you Jesus...Best Friend Forever. Amen.

ⁱ <https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic> read on 1/19/18 'Harvard Business Review' written by Vivek Murthy, former US Surgeon General (word for word)

ⁱⁱ https://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/loneliness_2010.pdf read on 1/19/18 AARP (amended)

ⁱⁱⁱ Op cit., hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09

