

“The Gift of Friendship”

John 15:9-17

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You don't need to be a doctor or sociologist to understand there's an epidemic of loneliness in our world and it is continuing to spread unabated at an unprecedented rate. The interesting thing is that even with the addition of social networks like Snapchat and Facebook, instead of mitigating it, they only seem to add to and intensify the problem. Even before the pandemic, 3 in 5 Americans in 2020 reported feelings of loneliness. Two years later and after months of self-isolation due to covid, these numbers have only escalated. And no one is immune from its influence either as studies have shown how groups like our elderly, young college students, middle-class workers, and cross-cultural communities have been particularly affected. People are becoming less involved in what were once booming social activities such as baseball teams and bowling leagues, and organizations like the Lions and Elks clubs or the Masons, preferring to isolate themselves in front of their computer screens or TV sets instead. It's also a large reason why fewer persons attend church these days- they don't connect with others to the same degree as they once did and it's creating a much healthier nation in every way- physically, mentally and emotionally.

Much of this can be traced back to the lack of significant relationships in people's lives. For years now, “friendship” in America has been in decline, a trend which only accelerated during the pandemic. Thirty years ago, 3% of Americans told Gallup pollsters they had no close friends; in 2021, an online poll put it at 12%. About a year into the pandemic, 13% of women and 8% of men age 30-49 said they'd lost touch with most of their friends. I find myself dwelling on how important my own relationships are since in the past year and a half, I've lost four of my closest comrades to the disease. As a result, I find myself more motivated than ever in letting my friends know how much they mean to me and am making more of an effort to stay in closer touch with many of them.

Most of you are aware that I'm a HUGE Red Sox fan. With MLB.TV, you can get all the games streamed live on either your computer or TV set, and I try to catch as many of them as I can. Well I recently finished a book by the late historian David Halberstam, ALSO a great Sox fan, called *The Teammates: A Portrait of a Friendship*. It's a chronicle about the love that three former players had for each other and one special teammate in particular, and how when he was dying, they took a 1,300 mile trip to be with him during his final days. Back in the 40's and 50's, Dom DiMaggio, Bobby Doerr, and Johnny Pesky (names familiar to some of you) all played together, but the one common denominator in their lives which kept their relationship strong through these many years was the indomitable presence of the “Splendid Splinter” himself, Ted Williams- a man considered by many to be the greatest pure hitter in baseball history. The book served as a memoir of their 60-year friendship together and the deep love that bound them into such a special unit. As Halberstam explained:

“That was something unusual in baseball: four men who played for one team, who became good friends, and who remained friends for the rest of their lives. Their lives were forever linked through a thousand box scores, through long hours of traveling on trains together, through shared moments of triumph, and even more in the case of the Red Sox, through shared

moments of disappointment. They were aware that they had been usually lucky not just in the successful quality of their career, but also in the richness of the friendships they had made. And they were all too aware that it was unlikely to happen again, that the vast changes in the sport, especially free agency, made rosters more volatile while the huge salaries somehow served to lessen the connection among teammates rather than solidify it...

It was different for the four of them, coming as they did from so different an era. After they stopped playing, they kept in touch, continuing to pay close attention to each others' lives. When Dominic was diagnosed in 1962 with Paget's disease, a rare and cruel disorder that causes enlarged or deformed bones, the others were acutely aware of his ordeal... When Pesky, about 20 years ago, began to lose weight at a frightening rate, they were all very nervous. Ted was sure Pesky had cancer... 'I'm worried about our needle-nosed little shortstop,' Williams told the others... For many years, the glue that held them together as friends was Williams... He might not, the other three teammates knew, be the easiest man in the world to deal with. He always did what he wanted and never did anything he did not. But to no small degree, he was the one who had kept them friends; they stayed close because he willed them to stay close. In a way they had become his family—his real family, the one from his childhood had been difficult, always causing him more pain than pleasure—and there was an awareness that Ted was always there for them."

I've been fortunate enough to be a part of a SIMILAR coterie in my own life. There is a group of guys who I attended college and seminary with and who for the past forty years have all remained active as Presbyterian ministers. Some of us have known each other for almost half a century and I probably feel closer to them than I do to many members of my immediate family. It's implicitly understood that if a problem or emergency arises, we wouldn't hesitate to drop whatever we're doing to be there for that person regardless of the great distance between some of us. Around twenty years ago, we agreed that since we weren't getting any younger and one of us in particular was facing a life-challenging illness, we needed to be MORE INTENTIONAL about getting together. Therefore, we made a pact that every year we would hold a week-long reunion somewhere in the country- not just to have fun but to also extend encouragement and support to one another. Thus, for the past two decades, we have remained faithful to that commitment and it has become one of the highlights of each year for us. When I tell other pastors about our annual gatherings and the closeness we share, I am surprised to often hear them say how much they wish they had such a group to meet with, that they find themselves so alone in their pastorates. And this is not uncommon as ministry in the church continues to be one of the loneliest professions there is. According to a recent survey by the pollster Barna, 41% of Protestant pastors said they had seriously considered quitting full-time ministry just within the past year, a number that was up 13 points since the beginning of last year.

Regardless, I think we all know from experience that when we discover a "true" friend, it is indeed a very special thing. Such a friend is someone we can trust, someone always there to offer support and encouragement, especially when faced with the worst and most difficult of life's circumstances. Robin Dunbar, in his recent book "Friends," says that studies seem to indicate that humans are only able to maintain about 150 connections at once- people you feel comfortably altruistic toward. Within that group, there is a circle of roughly fifteen CLOSER friends who are your everyday social companions, such as people you go to dinner or the movies with. And then within THAT group, there are about five persons who make up your MOST

INTIMATE circle- those who are willing to give you unstinting emotional, physical and financial help in your time of need.

Jesus utilized a similar model within his OWN ministry where he had a large group of followers and supporters which were then narrowed down to twelve individuals whom he considered his personal disciples, and of which three--Peter, James, and John--were members of his INNERMOST circle- his closest and most trusted allies. In Matthew, he was constantly being criticized by his opponents for having no boundaries in his friendships, that he went so far as to become a friend of tax collectors and sinners. However, it is in John's gospel where we find the greatest elaboration on the theme of "friendship." He uses the word "friend" (from the Greek *phileo*), six times. For instance, in chapter 10, Jesus tells his followers that the Good Shepherd "lays down his life for his friends"; in chapter 11, he refers to Lazarus as "our friend"; and it is here in vv. 13-15 of chapter 15 that Jesus elevates his disciples from mere servants to now his "friends," his CLOSEST of intimates, persons bound by mutual respect and devotion to one another.

This is a radical change of relationship that takes place between them. A servant (or slave) may well be liked by his master and well treated, but in the end, he (or she) is STILL owned and used by the master for whatever purpose he might have for him. But Jesus is announcing that their previous arrangement has now changed completely. He has elevated their relationship to the level of FRIENDSHIP and it is no longer one of slavish obedience but of equal respect and mutual co-operation. No longer is it a relationship defined by an unequal distribution of power but a bond constituted solely on the basis of love. And what is that love? It is such that one is willing to sacrifice EVEN HIS OWN LIFE on behalf of another- that is the ONLY kind of love Jesus ever expects from his friends, the same love that led him to lay down his OWN life on behalf of them and the REST of humankind!

What Jesus is doing is instructing them that when the Holy Spirit comes, there will be ONE authority governing their lives and it will no longer be a PERSON such as a master might have over a servant, but rather a new SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE. Two chapters earlier, in John 13, he had given his followers a NEW commandment. No longer were they under the supreme obligation of the Mosaic Law, that is, the Ten Commandments, for he has now given them a NEW law to obey. He tells them, "A NEW command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved YOU, so you must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."(13:34-35) And this NEW law places upon them an obligation that is FAR MORE comprehensive and MORE demanding than any law received by Moses at Mt. Sinai. Jesus summed it up for them in as clear and concise a statement possible when he told them, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (15:13)." If they are TRULY his disciples, then their OWN lives must be characterized by the same KIND and same DEGREE of selflessness that he has consistently shown to THEM- a love that is UNCONDITIONAL, that refuses to discriminate as to who is deserving of it or not; and a love that is SACRIFICIAL, a love that enables one to lay down his or her OWN life even as HE is about to do for THEIR sake.

Jesus tells them that if they take his commandment seriously, that they are to love one another in the same manner and to the same degree that he himself loves them, then by doing so, they reveal to the world that they truly ARE his friends. He asks them to love freely and generously, without wondering and worrying about who is on the receiving end of that love for

such was the love Jesus had towards Judas even though he was all-too aware of how he was about to be betrayed by him! He did not exclude Judas from the circle of his love but loved him in the same way and to the same depth he loved all the others. What counts MOST is NOT the character of those who receive this love for if we only love those who we think are deserving of our love such as those we know will love us in return, then that's not love AT ALL, at least not love on the level that God loves US with. Jesus says what is MOST important is that we love others INDISCRIMINATELY, that is, with a love that is both SELFLESS and SACRIFICIAL for by so doing, it proves to the rest of the world that God is real, that the nature of this God is love, and that this same God of love now resides deep within oneself.

By treating his followers as full partners in his relationship with God, Jesus is not just the MODEL of what true friendship looks like, he is no less the SOURCE by which his disciples are able to demonstrate such love and friendship. Having known and experienced his love and forgiveness in their OWN lives, and having gone from being mere followers or students of his to the more INTIMATE status of PERSONAL FRIENDS, they now possess the capacity to love others as Jesus HIMSELF did, to love those who may be different or foreigners or possibly even their enemies. Furthermore, having now become his friends, Jesus can speak openly with them and make known to them everything he has heard from the Father.

However, WITHOUT such love being modeled in their OWN lives, they can hardly be called a TRUE follower or disciple of his! You see, Jesus didn't just TALK the language of friendship, he DEMONSTRATED it through his life and death and now he commands that his disciples--and by extension WE OURSELVES--must DO THE SAME. There is nothing ambiguous here when he says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." It is among the most radical statements Jesus ever makes because he's declaring that such love is not unique or particular just to himself- it must now become the standard way of life to ANY AND ALL who would claim to be his follower, an action replicated over and over again without limit.

Jesus' whole life incarnated the ideal of friendship. He sought out and made friends with persons of every stripe and that included the blind, the lame, and the leprous; thieves and prostitutes and even tax-collectors- like Matthew who eventually became one of his disciples. He was never interested in who people WERE—whether they were Jews or Gentiles, male or female, young or old--because he would confer upon them a WHOLE NEW IDENTITY. Through him, they would become sons and daughters of God and his own brothers and sisters. He was never concerned about what it was that people had DONE IN THEIR PAST regardless how vile their lives had been because through the gift of God's grace and forgiveness, he knew WHAT they could BECOME once they were FREED from their past with all its guilt and failures and transgressions!

A while back, I saw Ringo Starr--the former drummer for the Beatles--being interviewed for some television program and he was asked about his relationship to George Harrison, the lead guitarist of the group. The interviewer wondered if he remembered his last conversation with George before he died of lung cancer in 2001 at the age of 58. Ringo said he never forgot it. George was in Switzerland. He was very sick from the cancer and could only lay down. Ringo had traveled all the way to see him and then was flying on to Boston because his daughter was seriously ill with a brain tumor. Finally Ringo said, "Well I gotta go, I gotta go to Boston." At that point in the story, he stammered for a brief second in order to clear his throat and take a deep

breath. With with tears filling his eyes and his voice choked with emotion, Ringo continued, “And then George says, ‘Do you want me to come with you?’ Those were the last words I heard him say, actually.”

Like Ringo, I’ve never forgotten that story because it not only gave me some insight into the kind of person I always suspected George Harrison to be, a genuinely humble man who possessed tremendous compassion for others, but because it ALSO epitomized for me the definition of what a TRUE FRIEND is. Here George is dying and yet he placed above his own condition the concern he had for Ringo whose own sick daughter was desperately ill at the same time; he was willing to travel half-way around the world regardless of how he felt if it would be any comfort to his old band mate. Now if THAT wasn’t a picture of one willing to “lay down his life for his friend” then you tell me WHAT IS!

Such was the love George had for Ringo and such is the love that Jesus has for each of US. The fact is that when we first encountered Christ, we were invited to become members of his ever-enlarging family, bound to each other for all eternity with God as our Father and Jesus as our brother. As he did his disciples, he now counts US among his closest and dearest friends. As such, he promises to always be there with us and for us wherever we might be, providing us his presence and his peace. Therefore, Jesus becomes for us our MODEL of what true friendship looks like as well as the SOURCE by which such relationships are maintained. Being a TRUE friend is one who can “love without limits,” one who is always willing to take the risk of loving others even if they refuse to reciprocate in kind because that’s the risk that JESUS took when he loved us and made us HIS friend. Amen and amen.