

“80’s TV: II – FRIENDS”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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John 19:5-7

Back in the 1970’s, singer James Taylor released a new song that went like this:

“When you’re down and troubled, and you need a helping hand,
And nothing, nothing is going right.
Close your eyes and think of me – and soon I will be there,
To brighten up even your darkest night.
You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am
I’ll come running to see you again.
Winter, spring, summer or fall, all you have to do is call
And I’ll be there – you’ve got a friend!”

It was a great song, and it must have touched a nerve, because 80’s television was chocked full of shows about friends. Some of you will remember them – shows like:

“Friends” – centered around a group of six yuppie friends living in Manhattan – whose theme song was “I’ll be there for you . . .”

And “Cheers” – “you wanna go where people know your troubles are all the same, you wanna go where everybody knows your name . . .”

And “The Golden Girls” – “thank you for being a friend.”

They were great shows, and every week in every episode, they showed the incredible power and importance of friendship.

As do both of the scripture lessons this morning. The lesson from the Hebrew scriptures tells us just a little bit about the friendship between David and Jonathan. If you don’t know their story, I commend it to you, and encourage you to read the whole thing, which you’ll find in I Samuel. Theirs is quite an unlikely friendship, because David, the one chosen by God and anointed by God, is threatening to King Saul – and King Saul is Jonathan’s father.

So – here’s the picture – Saul is out to get David and eliminate him, and his very own son Jonathan becomes David’s best friend. So theirs is a story of a friendship that probably shouldn’t have been, but was. Theirs is a friendship that survived despite all odds. Theirs is a friendship, like Jesus said, willing to lay down one’s life for the other. So when you have some time, read about it.

In today's Gospel lesson from John, Jesus gives us a primer on friendship, if you will. He tells us the kind of friends we are, and also tells us the kind of friends we should be.

Listen again to his words: "I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends." And "Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

To Jesus, friendship was vitally important. Writer Leonard Sweet has said that, "Jesus invests in friendships. His capacity for intimacy is immense. He has a communal spirituality. He grows spiritually in his awareness of the divine through relationships, and draws strength from his encounters with people." (Leonard Sweet, *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*, p. 33)

I love Sweet's line that Jesus "grows spiritually in the awareness of the divine through relationships," because isn't that so true? Isn't it true that God becomes more real for us through our friendships? Isn't it true that the things that mark friendships – things like support, encouragement, presence, and peace – are also the things that mark our relationship with God? So it makes sense that the more we experience good friendships, the more we see the face of God, right?

Well, let me get started with talking about some of those things that mark friendship by way of a story.

Stu Webber entered the Army during the time of the Vietnam War. It was 1967, and he was sent to US Army Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. It was really tough going all the way. Of course, in the back of all of those young recruits' minds was the very real possibility that they would soon be going into combat in the war. But before that, they had to get through the ranger training.

Heading up their training was a really, really tough drill sergeant with a deep, raspy voice. Webber distinctly remembers some of his early words to the fresh recruits:

"We are here to save your lives. First, we are going to see to it that you overcome all your natural fears . . . and second, we are going to show you how much incredible stress the human mind and body can endure. And when we're finished with you, you will be the US Army's best! America's best! You will be confident, you will survive, even in combat. And you will accomplish your mission."

And then, Webber remembers, before he dismissed them, he gave them their first assignment. Now, they were ready for anything. They had mentally prepared for a 16 mile hike in full battle gear, and they had repelled down a sheer cliff. So what would be this tough guy's first order?

It was: "Find yourself a Ranger buddy! You will stick together. You will never leave each other. You will encourage each other, and as necessary, you will

carry each other.” (Stu Webber, “Locking Arms,” in Andy Cook’s online sermon, “The Power of a Faithful Friend”)

Well, if those four things are not hallmarks of the kind of friendship Jesus was talking about, I don’t know what is. So let’s look at them together for a few moments this morning.

Stick together, and never leave each other. One of the great hallmarks of friendship is presence, always being there for each other. Jesus showed that consistently throughout the gospels – he was never too busy for his friends. He stopped to be with them, when others would have pushed him on to take care of business. He valued time with his friends, for it replenished his soul. If his friends needed him, he came.

That’s what friends do. They are there for each other, even when it’s inconvenient. Your friends are the ones you can count on to be there.

One of my dearest friends in life is a woman named Linda Southall. Linda lives just outside of Boston with her husband Hugh, a retired Air Force colonel. I’ve known Linda for 32 years, and even though we live seven hours away from each other, if I need her, she’s there – at the other end of the phone, and sometimes, in person. I remember when Dad died, she and Hugh were in Indianapolis, but as soon as she got my call, they headed to Elkton and stayed for a week, helping in any way that they could.

That’s what friends do – they are present, they are there, they never leave each other. And, in each of those ways, they point the way to God, for they are reflections, they remind us, of God’s love that is present, always there, and never leaves us alone.

The second hallmark of friendship that that drill sergeant pointed out was that friends encourage each other. Oh my, there is no better example of anyone ever being more encouraging than Jesus. Story after story in the gospels is about Jesus encouraging people –

Jesus encouraging Zacchaeus to come down out of the tree and start a new life –

Jesus encouraging Peter to step out of the boat –

Jesus encouraging children to come to him, when others would have blocked them –

Jesus encouraging Mary Magdalene to shed her past and make a new beginning –

Jesus encouraging his disciples every step of their journey.

That’s what friends do – they encourage each other, they hold each other up, they support them and make them better.

Let me tell you how my friend Linda encouraged me in the early years of my ministry. Back then, when I was first starting out in my student pastorate, I preached once a month, and then when I got into my first full-time appointment at Aldersgate, where there were three full-time pastors on the staff, I only got to preach on Sunday mornings six times a year. So that doesn't give you much practice – and as a result, I was always very nervous about my sermons and my preaching. I always worried that my sermons would be okay.

So, after I wrote my sermons, I would get on the phone with Linda and preach them to her over the phone. Every single time! Now, that's a friend – who will listen to a novice preacher preach full-length sermons over the phone, and give feedback. She never once said she was too busy; she always encouraged me, even when she made suggestions for changes; and every time she calmed my nerves and let me know it was going to be okay.

That's what friends do – that's what friends are for – encouragement and support.

The last thing the drill sergeant told his recruits was that their buddy would be one to carry them, if necessary. Sometimes you just can't go on, and it's your friend that carries you through.

I remember one day a person came into my office extremely despondent and confessed that she was really struggling. She wasn't even sure she had faith in God anymore, and you know what I said to her. "We'll have faith for you, we'll carry you to God, until you're ready to do it yourself." That's what friends do.

And they do it in so many other ways as well. When Peter began to sink under the water, because he doubted, Jesus lifted him up and carried him to safety. When Mary and Martha struggled because of the death of their brother Lazarus, Jesus came to them, wept with them, and then carried them in their grief to a time of great joy when he brought Lazarus back to life. When the paralyzed man's friends lowered him through the roof to lay him at the feet of the Savior, Jesus said this is what friendship looked like.

And when he died on the cross for us, when he laid down his life for us, his friends – he showed us most perfectly what it means to be a friend.

Through our friendships – in all these ways – by sticking together, encouraging each other, and carrying each other – we are drawn closer to God, because our friendships are a lovely reflection of the way he loves us – how he is always with us, always encouraging us, always carrying us, even unto death.

As I finish, I want to include one more thing that Jesus may not have outwardly said about friendships, but always practiced in his friendships – and that is that he let his friends always know how much they meant to him. Right here, in the Gospel lesson, is the perfect example – "I do not call you servants, I call you

friends.” Think about that – you’re not my servants, not those called to wait upon me, you are my friends, with whom I cherish spending time and sharing love.

Dear friends, do your friends know how much you care about them? Have you told them lately? If your friends are like my friends, then you are blessed. They’re always there for me, to pick me up when I’m down, to encourage me when I’m discouraged, to challenge me when I need it, to laugh with me and cry with me. And I suspect your friends are much the same.

When is the last time you told them how much they mean to you? Don’t assume they know it. Tell them. Write them a note. Give them a call. Say it straight out – tell them how important they are in your life – it will mean the world to them.

One of God’s greatest gifts in our lives is friendship. So cherish your friends, be a good friend, and let your friendships be a wonderful reminder always of Jesus – your first, last and best friend of all. May it be so.

Amen.