

January 4, 2026

“Gentle and Lowly: A Tender Friend”

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 and John 15:12-17

If this was NOT a Christian worship service in which our primary focus is to praise and pray to, hear from and respond to, obey and submit to the God who is unlike us but became one of us, we could spend the rest of our time talking about the joy, value, responsibility and beauty of human friendship. But we mostly gather in worship to do what I just mentioned, so this sermon needs to be more than a pep talk to have deeper friendships in 2026.

On the other hand, the God who is unlike us but became one of us, whom we must listen to and obey if we are ever going to rise above the brokenness in us and in our world, is also primarily RELATIONAL. Our Trinitarian theology tells us that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and works in relationships and through relationships; He always has. When God created us in His image, this included the desire all of us have to know and be known, to be loved and belong. We all have a longing for community; a longing for friendship. So, let's start by talking about our friendships at the human level, knowing our friendships on the horizontal level are connected beyond our limited perspectives and experiences in a vertical way to the One that can and should make all the difference in all of our relationships.

Think about your friends. [For now, I'm not asking you to think about family members – although I know we can and sometimes do have family that function as friends.]

If you were stranded in your car – 150 miles from home at either 7:15 am or 11:45 pm, who would you call to come and help you?

[OR] If you got really bad news about your health or your job or your family, who would you tell first?

[OR] If you felt lonely or afraid or sad (OR excited), who would you call or text?

There's a good chance that whoever comes to your mind is one of your closest friends. If you had 3-5 people who came to mind as answers to these questions consider yourself a fortunate person. Deep friendships are vital for human flourishing.

Our passage in Ecclesiastes 4 is just plain true. Friends bring warmth and protection and strength to our lives. This passage is not about a man and woman and romance – to be read at a wedding. This is about friendship and companionship and a steadfast commitment to stand alongside another person; to pick them up when they fall; to offer the warmth of love as needed.

Is there someone who would go anywhere and do anything for you?

Who would you go anywhere for or do anything for?

I have talked a lot over the years about my lifelong friends Greg, Johnny and Scott. Each of these three friendships has benefitted from the gift of time. Friendships take years to be forged. We have to consistently show up, sacrifice for and be vulnerable with others to form the strong cords mentioned in Ecclesiastes 4. Deep trust and heartfelt connection take years to be built, not weeks. There are no shortcuts to life-giving friendships and very little – if anything - more important than cultivating them. But these deep friendships are in short supply these days. And that's nothing new.

We read about superficial friends in the Book of Proverbs. “Some friends play at friendship but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother or sister.” (Proverbs 18:24) Friendships are worth the investment/cultivation – whether we are Christians or not. I love leading Men's Ministry for a lot of reasons, one of which is getting to see men grow together – over time – as deep friends. Again, if this were just a talk on human friendships, I could go on and on about the who and the how and the why of relationships. What I really love about Men's Ministry, or watching others lead our Women's Ministries, or being part of the re/development of small groups here at FPC is that we are not only trying to connect people in deeper ways, but we do so in the name and presence of the greatest friend any of us could ever hope for or imagine.

Our Gentle and Humble (Lowly) Jesus is not only Lord, Savior, Mediator, Advocate – and a whole lot more – but He is also A Tender Friend, or Companion. Dane Ortlund points out to us that a “Companion . . . specifically connotes the idea of someone who goes with [us] on a journey. As we make our pilgrimage through this wide wilderness of a world, we have a steady constant friend. What I am trying to say in this chapter is that the heart of Christ not only heals our feelings of rejection with His embrace, and not only corrects our sense of His harshness with a view of His gentleness, and not only changes our assumption of His aloofness into an awareness of His sympathy with us, but it also heals our aloneness with His sheer companionship.” [Page 118]

At the end of His three years with His closest followers and friends, Jesus says, “You are My friends if you do what I command.” (John 15:14) I hope you like the sound of that first part: “You are My friends.” You might wonder about what comes after it: “If you do what I command.” Does that sound a little conditional to you? Isn't the kind of love that ebbs and flows based on terms and conditions what's wrong with friendships/relationships these days?

This is where we have to remember that in the context of the whole passage, Jesus is commanding His followers to abide in Him and warning them they can't do anything that He does unless they stay connected to Him. At the end of our passage, He tells them (and us) that He gives His commands “so that you may love one another.” (John 15:17) In other words, “You will stay connected to Me in friendship as you stay connected to each other with the love I pour into you as you stay connected to Me.”

But what about when we blow it? Does Jesus stop thinking of us as friends?

This is where a few key verses in the chapter should help clarify the heart of Christ when we DON'T obey His commands. If you read the chapter, you saw that one of the verses Ortlund draws attention to is how some of Jesus' antagonists described Him. In Matthew 11:19 – just before our central verse of “Come to Me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens” – Jesus is quoting some of His critics who described Him as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners.”

Ortlund says, “Though the crowds call Him the friend of sinners as an indictment, the label is one of unspeakable comfort for those who know themselves to be sinners. That Jesus is friend to sinners is only contemptible to those who feel themselves not to be in that category.” [Page 114] Ortlund also shares some helpful insights from Revelation 3 about who Jesus promises to “come in and eat with” if anyone opens the door He is knocking on. That promise is also to and for sinners.

I don't want to put words in Jesus' mouth, but I think it might be helpful to think of what He says in John 15:14 along these lines: ‘If you do what I command you show yourselves to be My friends; but I'll still be your friend when you don't.’ We can be certain that our Tender Friend loves us unconditionally.

Secondly, we can be sure that Jesus is the kind of friend who holds nothing back; is fully honest, transparent. He says, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from My Father.” (John 15:15) Jesus shared everything from His Father! The good stuff AND the hard stuff.

Jesus was certainly familiar with the nugget of wisdom in the Book of Proverbs that reminds us how much better the “wounds of a faithful friend” can be compared to the “kisses of an enemy.” (Proverbs 27:6) Jesus is a faithful friend who never leaves us in the dark when it comes to the realities and difficulties of life; the ways of His Kingdom; or the heart of His Father. He lays it all out there for our good – as He says in John 15:11 just before our reading this morning so “that [His] joy would be in us and that our joy would be complete/full.” (John 15:11) First, Jesus loves us unconditionally. Second, Jesus reveals fully.

Finally, Jesus practices mutuality in His friendship with us. Yes, He's King and Lord. “But equally,” Ortlund says, “and perhaps less obvious and intuitive to us . . . [Jesus] approaches us on our own terms and befriends us for both His and our mutual delight.” [Page 119] On the very last page of the chapter, Ortlund reminds us: “[Jesus] relates to us as a person. Jesus is not the idea of friendship, abstractly; He is an actual friend.” [Page 120]

Unconditional love. Full transparency, honesty and openness. The give and take of real mutuality. All of that, AND MORE, offered to us from our Tender Friend, Jesus. And with Christ in us, our friendships can begin to look more and more like His way of friendship – reflecting who He is more clearly in a world starving for what He offers and calls us to as friends.

As we celebrate communion this morning, let's remember what else Jesus said about the love He offered to His friends. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) Add sacrifice to His friendship list. And, of course, we now know that shortly after Jesus said this, He actually did just that. Add "follow through" while you're at it. May the love and friendship of Christ fill us and form our friendships until everyone has a friend they can call in the middle of the night for help.