Deepening My Relationships

For several weeks now, we have been thinking about the “me God wants us to be” and what it means to center our lives “In Christ together for the world.” To be in Christ is to follow Jesus and to experience the wonder of the Lord who loves you. We are “together” as we grow in our love for one another, and we are “for the world,” knowing that wherever we go, God is sending us. This morning, we focus on this matter of being “together” and deepening our relationships with another as we become the “me God wants us to be.”

Jesus makes a rather wonderful remark to his disciple-friends near the end of his earthly time. He simply says, “I have called you friends.” It’s difficult to think of many things that would be more significant, meaningful and encouraging in your life than someone looking you in the eye and saying, “I have called you friend.” A few weeks ago, Ann Marie and I had lunch with Dick and Terri Feiertag, two dear friends we had not seen for twenty years. They have just moved into the DC area. I vividly remember standing in the parking lot of the church we attended and Dick putting his hand out to shake mine as he said, “Stan, I would like to be your friend.” It was a good feeling then and, thirty years later, the memory is still a good feeling. So when Jesus says, “I have called you friends,” you know it’s a wonderful thing, and it’s no surprise that deepening the quality of our relationships with each other was and remains top on his mind.

In our text for this morning, we read this wonderful word: We declare to you what we have seen and heard [about Jesus] so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and the Son, 1 John 1:3). The word “fellowship” in this verse, “that you also may have fellowship with us and truly our fellowship is with the Father and the Son,” is the English translation of the Greek word koinonia. Koinonia means relationship, partnership, connectedness and shared life. It means a much deeper relationship than describing fellowship as talking with friends in church. Koinonia is deeply committed relationships rooted in God, based in trust, evident in acts of love.
Christian fellowship, more than simple human friendship and commitment, includes the loving presence of Jesus Christ. Actually, our English word fellowship is a pretty good word to translate koinonia. It comes from an Old English word, fee-lowship. A fee was an ancient term for a cow, a person's wealth. Even today, a fee is wealth given for a product or a service rendered. English farmers had cattle grazing out in their fields, and between their fields were fences of wood or stone to keep the cattle from wandering onto someone else’s property where they might, perhaps, be stolen. When two farmers grew to trust one another and knew they could depend on each other, then they’d tear down the fences or open up the gates and let their cattle roam on each other’s land looking for the best pasture. They had a sufficiently trusted relationship that they’d put their most precious possessions in one another’s hands. So the root of fellowship is this idea of trusted, committed relationships. Fellowship—koinonia—is about real relationships.

Now, the Apostle John writes, “these things we proclaim to you in order that you may have fellowship with us,” and he continues by saying (get this) “our fellowship is with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ.” Interesting, isn’t it! Christian fellowship, more than simple human friendship and commitment, includes the loving presence of Jesus Christ. Sometimes people speak of the great fellowship they have experienced in some service club or a game of golf or tennis or bridge or a gathering in a home or an evening at the Kennedy Center. It certainly is fellowship in the contemporary English sense of the word, but it is only koinonia, fee-lowship, Christian fellowship, when the people having fellowship with others are simultaneously in fellowship with Jesus Christ. Can you have a truly deep relationship with someone if you do not share Jesus? Of course you can! And it can be a lifelong and life-sustaining relationship. However, any relationship that includes Jesus can grow to an even deeper level, the experience of koinonia fellowship.

When thinking about deepening our relationships, I find it helpful to consider two kinds of friends: friends of the road and friends of the heart. A friend of the road is a friend you make because you walk life’s road together. Perhaps you are neighbors on your street; perhaps you work in the same office, attend the same school, or participate in the same church. For whatever reason that you share the same road, it is the place where you become friends—true friends—supporting one another, encouraging one another, enjoying one another. However, when the road comes to an end, you leave the office, move to a

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1 Ray and Anne Ortlund, *Lord, Make My Life a Miracle.* (iUniverse: 2010).
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different house or change schools, then the friendship of the road comes to an end. It may remain as a Facebook friend but intimacy fades. Our lives may be filled with friends of the road.

A friend of the heart, on the other hand, is a friendship that, by virtue of some God-given chemistry between you, sees a deep and permanent bond grow between you. It doesn’t make any difference if your friend of the heart is in China and you are in Virginia. If you don’t see your friend of the heart for five years, it’s like no time has gone by. When Ann Marie and I had lunch with Dick and Terry Feiertag, whom we had not seen for twenty years, it felt like only yesterday since last seeing them. Think of the friends of the heart our Lord has given you here and in distant places, and be glad for them. I like to pray a simple prayer: “Lord, give me lots and lots of friends of the road and please move many of them as possible off of the road and into the heart.”

Sometimes people only spend time with a small number of friends of the road or of the heart. Talking with a friend about friends, he explained we are like the toy Legos. Every Lego block has eight prongs to connect with other legos. He was suggesting people have a limited number of “connectors” with which to make friends so, if you were like a Lego, you could make eight friends and that’s it. I think a much better way of thinking about the number of dear friends you may have are pieces of velcro which have countless “connectors.” Jesus had a great many very wonderful friends of the heart during his three years of ministry, and you can too!

This morning, I will share with you a few of the patterns for deepening relationships we see in the life of Jesus that we may enjoy ourselves. First, Jesus spent regular time with a small group of friends in the faith. In John 18:2 we read, "Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, because Jesus often met there with his disciples.” Just as Jesus spent time with large groups, so do we. While there are many wonderful activities in the life of the church, in which we sit in rows and listen to music and to someone speaking, there is no substitute for face-to-face groups of less than fifteen people, where we share in a simple, three-part practice known as Word-Share-Prayer. Word, some time in Bible study, Share, some time sharing what’s happening in our lives and Prayer as we pray for one another. When you are in a face-to-face small group engaged in these practices, it is amazing how new friendships of the heart begin to grow. I have a great many wonderful friends of the heart around the country because at some time we were in a small group...
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together. If you are not in one, as I indicated a while ago, our bulletin and our website are full of lots of ways to get into a small group. If you say you are too busy for this, remember you are the one who controls your calendar. If you are too busy to be in a group that will give you new friendships of the heart – you are too busy!

A second pattern Jesus used to grow friendships of the heart was time—spending lots of time with people. Why is time so important? Because the joy of enjoying relationships is being together—being “with” each other. In one of his most famous statements, Jesus said, “For I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself that [now get this] there you may be also” (John 14:2-3). Jesus loves the time you spend with him. Friendships grow on the road and move into the heart when you spend time together. Today, in our crazy, fast-paced lives, we have to look for ways to get that time in. A few years ago, people declared that quality time was more important than quantity time—that really focusing on people briefly was the key to relationship. I love quality time, but there is no substitute for quantity, either.

Our son lives in San Francisco and often calls me on his commute home. Well, that is 9:30 at night our time and, of course, I was tired and after a few minutes would say, “Lee, I love you but Dad’s really pooped.” And he’d say, “Okay Dad. Love you.” And that was it. Then one day it hit me. If I want to deepen my relationship with my son and know what he is doing and stewing over and what’s happening with my daughter-in-law and their twins, it means when he calls I talk as long as he wants to. Sometimes I have to stick my head under the cold water faucet in the kitchen to stay awake, but I don’t tell him that. And we are as close as ever. Are you spending time with the people you want to deepen your relationship with? In person, by phone, email, Facebook, Instant Messaging or some other way?

I was listening to some adults recently express their disapproval of Facebook and texting. They reminded me of my mother, who refused to get on e-mail because she actually was afraid her children wouldn’t call her. So she just missed out on all of the emailed conversation. If you want to spend time communicating with people today, then learn to use the social media.

A key pattern by which Jesus spent time with people and developed friendships of the heart was the shared meal. He often reclined at table with people and enjoyed eating dinner and sharing in lengthy conversations with them. The big meal of Jesus’ day was called the deipnon (dape-non). The deipnon is well-translated as “a lingering meal.” It is the
Even in this busy day, you can make the lingering meal a regular experience for those in your home, if you choose to do it.

A few years ago, when our daughter Lindsay was studying abroad, I took daughter Shelley to Paris to spend a week and to visit Lindsay. Shelley and I arrived after being awake for twenty-four hours, and we went to dinner at a little sidewalk café. Lindsay wasn’t to join us for a couple of days. We ordered dinner. I remember Shelley hollering “Dad! Dad!” as I had just fallen asleep in the chair. After dinner we waited for the check. It never came. We waited and waited and at least five times Shelley kept saying, “Dad, Dad, wake up!” Finally, I grabbed a waiter, got the bill, paid it and headed for the hotel. Later, when Lindsay showed up, she laughed at us. She said in America they bring you the bill right away so you will leave and they can turn the table and sit new guests, but in Europe, you have to ask for the bill, because they assume you have come to linger, to enjoy being together. It’s true in Mexico, as well. That’s the idea of the deipnon, the lingering meal in which you deepen relationships.

When I was growing up, we four kids would always be at the dining room table for dinner with Mom and Dad. However, the main purpose was simply eating. As soon as we were finished, everyone scattered. When I dated and married Ann Marie and began to share supper with her family, I learned a different pattern. They would gather and eat supper as my family used to, but then, everyone would push his chair back and would remain at the table and talk and talk and talk! At first I was fidgety, as I was used to getting up and doing something. I learned to sit, to linger, to enjoy conversation and now absolutely love it. The lingering meal grows friends of the heart!

Indeed, the deipnon, lingering meal, is a wonderful way to grow friends of the heart with anyone who lives in your home. Even in this busy day, you can make the lingering meal a regular experience for those in your home, if you choose to do it. And when you eat meals with other people and the television is turned on, then turn it off! Very little reasoned conversation, stories, hurts, anxieties and accomplishments are shared or appreciated in front of the tube. The heart and soul of relationships, family relationships and all friendships is conversation as we talk about what’s happening in our lives, the wider world and in storytelling, laughter and even tears.

When our children were home, Ann Marie and I followed the practice known as “the family table.” We
We were created for relationship, for friendship.

practiced it on Sunday night, though any weekly meal will do. If the format of a small-group Bible study is Word-Share-Prayer, the format of the family table is Eat-Share-Prayer. After eating a normal family supper, we go around the table with each of us sharing blessings from the last week and concerns (which often leads to extended conversations) for the coming week. Then we hold hands and pray around the circle, thanking God for the blessings in our lives and for the concerns we shared. The family table grows friends of the heart among those in your home over the deipnon, the lingering meal.

We learned an extension of the deipnon lingering meal in family life from the wonderful pastor Charlie Shedd. Ann Marie and I met him and his wife, Martha, when they were seventy-five and we were in our thirties. I happened to be talking with Charlie, and Ann Marie was standing next to me. He said, “I have taken Martha out for dinner every week for forty years (without the children) and you should, too! And take every child at home out to lunch once a month until they leave your home.” For thirty-six years we have done that. As you might imagine, over that time we have shared wonderful times and some rough patches and yet, week after week, the meal out together has been very huge in our marriage. And, in the monthly lunches with each child, every imaginable topic of conversation has come up—all the incredibly significant result of the deipnon, the lingering meal.

And what of the deipnon, the lingering meal, if you are living alone? We were created for relationship, for friendship. It’s why many people living alone have their television on during meal time. It’s company. The practice of hospitality, the open door, the shared meal, is especially important for the single person. To be with others at table on a regular basis in your home or theirs or going out to eat is as significant for you if you live alone as for those who happen to have family members or other people living in their homes.

This leads us to a wider issue in the use of the deipnon, the lingering meal, in the deepening of our relationships, and that is the Christian practice of hospitality. It is hospitality that opens your life to new friends of the road and grows them into new friends of the heart. Glenda Hoffman says, “Hospitality is making room for love.” I love how she puts that, because it is about opening your life and not just opening your home. I find it helpful to differentiate between friendliness and hospitality. Friendly is when you bump into me at Target. “Hi Stan, how are you? How’s Ann Marie? How’s your family, your car, your cat? See ya!” That’s friendly.
Hospitality asks, “Will you come into my life?”

friendly asks, “How are you?” hospitality asks a very different question. Hospitality asks, “Will you come into my life?”

We are having a bit to eat at home, will you join us? I am grabbing a cup of coffee at Café Amouri. Why don’t you join me? We’re going to the movies. Do come!

One thing to be aware of in our day is that many people spend most of their friend time with a small circle of friends, perhaps just one or two married couples or single friends. The Girl Scouts get it right when they say, “Make new friends but keep the old, one is silver and the other is [what?] Gold!”

People are so busy today that they tend to spend all of their deipnon, lingering meal time, with gold friends – those who are already friends of the heart. But you may grow many new friendships of the road, which move off the road and into the heart, when you also share in lingering meals with silver, those who are a bit newer to you. And if asking silver to have a meal with you makes you nervous, then ask a gold friend of the heart to share in inviting someone who is silver to a lingering meal and watch the good Lord bring new friends into your lives while deepening the old ones.

As we are “In Christ together for the world,” let us always remember that the “together” part is in mind of Jesus, who wants us to experience koinonia, fee-

lowship, with one another. So get in a small group! Spend time with people. Share in the deipnon, lingering meal, at “the family table,” with your spouse, with your friends (silver and gold) and with your children! May you have a great many friends of the heart and may our good Lord move many of them off of the road and into your hearts.