“You’ve Got a Friend”

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 15:12-17
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Today’s sermon is entitled, “You’ve Got a Friend.” Those who are my age and older will associate this title, “You’ve Got a Friend,” to a song by James Taylor from the early 70s written by Carole King. Actually, I had another song in mind. I was thinking of the song Woody sings to his friend Andy in the movie Toy Story.

“When the road looks rough ahead And you’re miles and miles from your nice warm bed, You just remember what your old pal said, Boy, you’ve got a friend in me. If you’ve got troubles, I’ve got them too, There is not anything I wouldn’t do for you We stick together and see it through Cause you’ve got a friend in me.”

It may be a simple ditty in a kid’s movie, but there is something that rings true about its lyrics. When the road looks rough and you’ve got troubles, just remember you’ve got a friend in me. We’re focusing today on friendship; specifically, what it means to be spiritual friends to each other.

We’re on a mission as a church of “Becoming like Christ Together for the World.” We focused last month on the first part of our mission—that of “becoming like Christ.” We urged you to read a 30-day devotional to aid in this pursuit. This month, we shift to the “together” section. We will explore four facets of our togetherness—as friends, marriage partners, family and community. During March and April, we’ll turn our attention outward to consider how becoming like Christ together is “for the world.”

Jesus said to his disciples, “You are my friends” (John 15:14). This is a staggering thought, really. Jesus wants to be our friend. How can it be that Almighty God wants to keep company with us? We sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” We wouldn’t dare sing, “What a friend Jesus has in us.” The friendship Jesus offers us is magnanimous on his part.

Jesus declares, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” What Jesus commands is enumerated two verses earlier, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (15:12). When we enter into friendship with Jesus, we sign on to become friends with each other. How it is that we can be all buddy-buddy with Jesus yet rude to his followers is beyond me.

There are two aspects of friendship with Jesus in this passage. Jesus is the source of friendship with God. He also models what spiritual friendship looks like. There are at least three ways in which Jesus models friendship for his disciples.
First, friends sacrifice for each other. Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). Jesus said earlier that, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). This is not mere hyperbole on Jesus’ part. He literally lays his life down for his friends.

Our approach to friendship has become super casual. Take the phenomenon of Facebook. The average person now has 250 Facebook Friends. Among those aged 18-24 the number jumps to 500+ friends. Yet, according to the research, we can maintain a stable social relationship with about 150 people.

Let’s be honest; Facebook Friends foster the illusion of friendship. We post updates to create a certain image of ourselves. This digital form of friendship is fun and friction-free.

Sherry Turkle is a professor at M.I.T. and a clinical psychologist. She has been studying developments in technology for several decades and has written extensively on the subject. In previous books, she was hopeful that technology would enhance communication between people. But, more recently, from recent research compiled in her book, Alone Together, she has arrived at a different conclusion. The premise of her latest book is that people can maintain constant digital communication with one another and yet still feel very much alone. Note the subtitle to her book, Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other.

This is not a rant on social media; it’s simply an acknowledgement of its limitation. It’s easier to text than talk with people.

Scripture places a high value on face to face relationships. We read in Exodus that God speaks to Moses “face to face, as one would speak with a friend (33:11).

Second, friends speak honestly with each other. Jesus said, “I don’t call you servants any longer, because a servant doesn’t know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything I heard from my Father” (15:15).

Jesus promotes us from servants to friends. He treats his disciples as full partners in his mission. Jesus doesn’t hold anything back. He makes known everything he has heard from the Father. St. Thomas Aquinas said, “A friend holds nothing if he is true. He pours forth his mind just as the Lord poured forth the mysteries of the Father.”
Look at it this way. Let’s suppose you take your car to the shop for service. When you pick up your car, the mechanic raves that your car is now in great shape. Yet, later that day, you find your brakes not working properly. You take your car back to the shop and ask the technician why he didn’t bother to tell you about your faulty brakes. “Well,” he says reluctantly, “I didn’t want you to feel bad. I didn’t want you to become upset. I want you to feel loved and accepted at my garage.”

You would be furious if he talked this way. When your health and safety is on the line, we don’t want someone to sugarcoat the situation. We want the truth. Anybody can flatter us. We want friends who tell us the truth. True friends tell us when we are taking ourselves too seriously or making poor choices. Aristotle likened friends to a mirror who show us our true selves.

Third, friends promote good will and faith in each other. Jesus said, “…I chose you….And I appointed you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last….I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another” (15:16-17). Paul writes elsewhere that the fruit of the Spirit is love (Galatians 5:22). We can’t produce fruit for God without love for the people of God.

I came across a book this week by a 12th century monk, Aelred of Rievaulx. He was chosen to lead the Rievaulx Abby in Northern England. He observed how often monks were ungracious and unkind toward each other. He wrote a treatise, On Spiritual Friendship, in which he differentiated spiritual friendship from carnal and worldly friendship. Carnal friendship is based on the shared pursuit of pleasure. Too often carnal friends lead us toward making wrong choices. Ask yourself whether your friends lead you to Christ or make it easier to gossip, remain bitter and nurse old grudges.

Worldly friendship is based on mutual advantage. Worldly friends establish friendships in order to get ahead, much as we would in business or politics. I came across a tragic quote this week from Marilyn Monroe: “Sometimes I think the only people who stay with me and really like me are people I hire, people I pay. Why can’t I have friends around me all the time, friends who want nothing from me?”

Aelred lifts up the value of spiritual friends who draw us closer to Christ. Aristotle likened friendship to schools of virtue. They bring out
the best in us. St. Augustine spoke of friendship as schools of Christian love.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life?

I urge you to read and explore this matter of spiritual friends. In our devotional last week, those in their 20s and early 30s wrote about various friendships in the Bible and what we learn from them. You can pick up a copy in the lobby or request it on-line.

We want to help you cultivate spiritual friendship in this church. We need friends who make sacrifices and tell us the truth. We need spiritual friends who have our best interests at heart. I was struck by something George Elliot wrote about friendship. Incidentally, George Elliot is actually a male pen name for a 19th century novelist, Mary Anne Evans, to insure that her work would be taken seriously. She writes, “Oh, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away.”

My final suggestion addresses what it means to enter into friendship with Jesus. Perhaps you’ve never thought of having a friendship with Jesus. You’ve exclusively imagined Jesus to be your Lord, Savior or teacher. Yet, what did he say? “I have called you friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

The picture on your screen is a wood carving from 550AD. It portrays Jesus who is holding the Scripture next to Abba Menas. Today, it hangs in a Paris museum. Abba Menas or St. Minas was an Egyptian soldier in the Roman army who was martyred for refusing to renounce his faith. What is distinctive about this wood carving is that Christ has his arm around Abba Menas.

You’ve got a friend! “I have called you friends.”