

“ON FRIENDSHIP”

John 15:9-17

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

At the very end of the iconic film, *Stand by Me*, the narrator and main character, Gordie, remembers this great adventure of his childhood, and asks a final question, “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve...[Really], does anybody?”

It’s a question I’ve often pondered. Can you ever have friends like the friends you had when you were growing up? The friends of your school or neighborhood, traversing town on your bikes like the kings and queens of all creation, the carefree summers, the snow days, the secret forts and sleepovers and birthdays and video games and pick-up basketball and lemonade stands and break-ups and fights that were really fights but then you came around and you were even closer after the kerfuffle than before. You who are young now might think your best friends in life are yet to come but you might think more about that. Can you ever have friends like the friends you had when you were growing up? Friends you never had a choice about, but who really know you, who understand you, who forgive you even before they’ve learned all that much about forgiveness at church? Friends who still love you even after a very intense game of Mario Kart?

I have a friend, Patrick, that I see only once or twice a year, now. But he’s been a friend practically since birth. I remember standing with him in the deep woods between our houses, cutting into our palms, the life trickling down our fingers, and shaking on it. Blood brothers. The Baptist preacher, Chuck Poole, has said, “It’s hard to make new, old friends.”

But around the age of 33, Jesus says to his disciples, “I have called you friends.” This is not a word Jesus uses casually. “I have called you... *friends*.” Jesus, Son of God, God in the flesh, says to his followers, “You are servants no longer, but friends.” We’re accustomed to associating Jesus’ miracles with turning water into wine, five loaves and two fish into a meal for thousands, walking on water, raising Lazarus from the dead. But what if the miracle that surpasses all of these is the miracle that God in the flesh, God-with-us, says to you his followers, “You are my friends.” Can there be a greater miracle than the one through whom the sun and moon and stars were created wrapping his arm around our shoulders, pulling us close, looking us straight in the eye, smiling sincerely, and saying, “*Friend*”?

Trying to understand the Christian life can be as complicated as string theory and working quadratic equations. It can also be as simple as cherishing this one truth: God created us for friendship. God desires our friendship. God designed us to befriend each another.

How do we know we’re friends with God? Our friendship bears the fruit of communion. Yes, we change over time. Our minds are transformed. Our hearts are softened. We become wiser. But even more, we are drawn out of our loneliness into deeper communion, empowered to live a more fruitful, ripe, abundant life because of our friendship with God.

How do we know we're friends with God? We've been drawn into an ongoing revelation, where we continuously learn more about God and desire to know more about God. Just as we wish to know more about a friend, God's offer of friendship with us inspires us to come closer to God, to read, pray, and wonder more and more about who God is, and what God is preparing in God's own heart just to share with us. Friendship with God is a relationship of continual revelation.

How do we know we're friends with God? When we've received a gift so wonderful we're almost embarrassed to open it in front of others. Jesus tells the disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I love you." We did nothing to deserve this love. Jesus is God's love given to us out of God's own good pleasure. God gives Jesus to us because God longs to be in close proximity to us. We could not come to God if God had not first come to us. Friendship with God is pure gift.

These ways of confirming our friendship with God are the same ways we recognize friendship with one another. Friendship bears the fruit of communion. Friendship opens us to revelation. Friendship is pure gift.

I was the campus pastor of PASSPORT once upon a time. It was one of the most fascinating, fun, exhausting, and difficult summers of my life. You spend a lot of time close to people, whether you want to be or not. After a week or two, you know who you enjoy most. John and I became friends. Belly laugh friends. Do you have a belly-laugh friend? But sometimes I caught myself wondering if this would just be an acquaintance or the enduring friendship I hoped it would be. The night before our last worship service, John invited me down the hallway behind the auditorium. "I have something I'd like to share with you." He led me into the rehearsal room where, on the stage, he had set a candle, and a chalice and paten with bread and wine. We took communion together. Prayed for one another. John lives in Iowa. But our friendship continues bearing the fruit of communion. Though I confess to the loneliness of a distant friendship.

We are, in fact, such a lonely people. I attribute the number of pets we have as a sign of our loneliness. Nothing wrong with having a dog or cat. But there is something quite different going on now. I believe we are becoming more dependent on animals for companionship because we have become more isolated from one another.

Jesus says, "I have called you friends, *because* I have made known to you everything the Father has given me." Perhaps our loneliness has to do with how shallow so many of our friendships have become. Thinned out by distance or by our own busyness, . But also lacking depth because we are too afraid to make ourselves known to others as Jesus has made himself known to us. How do you know the difference between a friend and an acquaintance? A friend is someone to whom we can confess our sins, who will not judge us harshly, but who will love us through it all. Jesus' friendship with us is founded on making something known that had been hidden—Jesus makes known to us the very heart of God. His sharing the heart of God with us is what establishes our friendship.

Friendship also comes to us as pure gift. I remember my dad telling me about a decade ago that my tenth grade World History teacher had inquired about me in town one day. I hadn't seen Mrs. Johnson in years, and frankly, I was still afraid of her from tenth grade. I had a penchant for being a 'class clown', but not with Mrs. Johnson. There were no class clowns with Mrs. Johnson, because we were pretty sure Mrs. Johnson had a guillotine somewhere.

"Mrs. Johnson asked about me?" "Yes. She wanted to know all about you. She wanted to know all about what you were doing in school, knew that you were wanting to be a minister." Two years later, "Mrs. Johnson asked about you again." "Really? Mrs. Johnson?"

I was preaching out of town one day, about fifty miles from the North Carolina coast, in Murfreesboro, just a random opportunity to preach as a guest, and there she was, Mrs. Johnson. I went up and gave her a hug, and we talked for a little while.

Then I preaching again in Durham, and in the back row, there was Mrs. Johnson. We talked again, and she invited me to lunch. It was a lovely lunch. Mrs. Johnson is in her 80's now, but she is the one that helped me get the job in the church where I was preaching when the Search Committee came and found me.

I don't know that I would be here if it weren't for Mrs. Johnson, reaching out to me. Through all of that, we became good friends, and we still talk on the phone. I have found myself baring my soul to her in ways that I didn't to my friends when I was twelve. I think she is 81, and she is one of my best friends! Surprise! Friendship that God makes possible for us in Jesus Christ, is pure gift.

There was a study done—and I'll conclude with this—an on-going study that started about 75 years ago at the University of Harvard, with its current director being Dr. Robert Waldinger. Decades ago, they started with young children, and now these children have grown into their 80s and 90s.

Once these kids turned into octogenarians, they were able to look across their lives and register the qualities that make for thriving years in your 80's. What's the surest indicator that you're going to thrive when you're 80's? The study found that the people who had the strongest friendships—not the most wealth, not the most success, not the biggest house, not the most Twitter followers—but the closest, deepest, richest, most abiding friendships.

God has given us this wonderful Church for friendship with God and each other. Has God befriended us here? Has God made new friendships possible, and sustained old ones? Then we might be in the right place to make and sustain friendships that are at least as communal, revelatory, and surprisingly graceful as the ones we had when we were twelve.

