

# The Importance of Friendship

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Preaching on:  
Psalm 23 &  
Acts 2:42–47

What are the most important Christian values? What do you think? What comes to mind? If you ask the average person out on the street, I think you'd get answers like faith, loving God, not sinning all the time, forgiveness, kindness, generosity maybe. None of these answers are wrong, but one of the most important Christian values often gets forgotten about—and that's friendship.

One of the most unique parts of the Christian religion is our focus on our connection not just to God but to other people. This connection is so important that when Jesus is asked what is the most important value?, he answers as people would have expected him to answer, that it's to love God with everything you've got. But unexpectedly he then adds a second value which he says is connected to the first—to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is Christianity's unique interpretation of religion—and one of our most fundamental and defining values—that the love of God cannot be separated from the love of other people. If you love God and not other people, you've gotten something fundamentally

wrong. And when you love other people, perhaps even without knowing that you're doing it, you are also loving God.

In our scripture reading this morning, the 23rd Psalm displays two big values of the psalmist (which tradition says was the Biblical King David). Number 1: God is a personal refuge from the difficulties of this world, and God is an escape from other people. And Number 2: Once you've taken refuge in God, God is gonna stick it to your enemies.

Jesus was a part of an ancient Jewish tradition, which becomes incorporated into Christianity, which pushes at the boundaries of this kind of theology. Jesus teaches us that God is not a personal refuge from trouble, but a universal refuge from trouble. When we turn to God, we do not turn away from our neighbors, we turn toward them even more profoundly. And we do not pray for revenge on our enemies, we love even our enemies as our neighbors, as ourselves.

Now, you can't be friends with everybody, of course. We know that. It's not just that there are some people you would really rather not hang out with, it's that true friendships take time and energy, and time and energy are limited resources, so the number of friendships we can make and sustain is finite. However, a society that fundamentally believes in the value of friendship—that fundamentally believes that love of neighbor is not just an obligation, but is actually just the best way to live, a society that believes that human connection and kindness and relationship are important and which lives out those values by each member of that society putting time and energy into healthy, flourishing friendships will look very different from a society that has grown suspicious of its neighbors, that has pulled back from the public square, that has devalued the importance of friendship, and become cold, and distant, and isolated. Yes, you can only have so many friendships. But when you hold those friendships as a sacred value and when your culture holds the value of friendship as an ideal, it benefits everybody.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have seen the devastating consequences of living in a society that has come to believe that isolation is somehow safer than other people. Ralph Yarl, a 16-year-old boy, was shot in the head for ringing the doorbell at the wrong house. Kaylin Gillis, a 20-year-old young woman, was shot and killed for being a passenger in car that went up the wrong driveway. Two cheerleaders were shot in a grocery store parking lot when one of them accidentally got into the wrong car. These "wrong place" stories took the news by storm, but they are not unique, stories like this happen almost every day across the country.

The world is a scary place. In the United States there are more guns than people. Over the last two decades mass shootings have terrified us. At the same time, we've become more and more culturally and politically polarized. And the rhetoric of these culture wars and this political strife is driving us further apart and making us more afraid of one another. Social media has changed the way we think of human interaction. It has made us more connected, but it has also made us WAY more toxic. And the data shows that Americans have fewer friends, belong to fewer community groups that meet in person,

spend less time with family and friends, and go out of the house into public for work, for entertainment, and for shopping less often than ever before. And this trend was happening decades before the pandemic separated us even further.

When the world goes kind of crazy we might just want to get away from everyone. We might want to buy a few more guns. It might feel safer to isolate ourselves in a bunker. I think it's normal to feel that way. But isolation, it turns out, is a symptom of and not a solution to our cultural problems. And this I believe with all my heart—isolation makes all of us LESS SAFE than community and cooperation. You are LESS SAFE when you are alone than when you have a community. You are MORE DANGEROUS to innocent people when you are alone than when you have a community.

So, Friendship Sunday is not just a gimmick to get you to come to church. It's a gimmick to hopefully connect you to people who truly love and care about you. Because we fundamentally believe as a church that your friendship makes our lives and our world a better place. We believe that what was good for the early Church (as we read in the Acts of the Apostles) is also good for us today—spending time together, worshiping together, getting to know one another deeply, learning about one another's needs, and providing for those needs, sitting down and eating meals together, praying together—holding all things in common. Friendship is a Christian value and is a value that we need now more than ever.

Over Lent I reread Bronnie Ware's book, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*. Ware was a hospice nurse and she found that there were certain regrets that came up over and over again in her dying patients' final days. One of the top five regrets was "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends." It's sometimes friends that someone lost touch with decades and decades ago that they most want to see with when they're dying. Let this be a lesson for all of us who are not yet dying—do not undervalue the power and the importance of your friendships. It doesn't matter if it's been 50 years or more. Reach out to that old friend. This is one thing that Facebook is good for—finding old friends. Old friends are a part of your soul. Reconnect to them and you will give yourself (and them) spiritual healing. In the end, says Ware, it all comes down to love and relationships. Yes, people might want to try to get the will in order, fix up the finances, get this or that detail wrapped up, but in those final weeks all that is really left is love and relationships.

Friendship is a fundamental Christian value. In a time of mistrust and violence in our culture, friendship is the value which can bring us back into healthy relationships with all our neighbors. Friendships are a part of our very souls. And in the end friendship, love, relationship is all we really have. So, friends (old and new!) thank you for being here at our first annual Friendship Sunday, we love you, we appreciate you, you are a part of us, and we're here for you.