

“Being a Friend”

Text: John 15: 9-17

Prayer: God of love and friendship, may we welcome your holy presence among us and within us as we listen and reflect on your Word today. Amen.

It was in 1983 when Debbie and Michael W. Smith wrote the song, “Friends” that was played as our gathering piece. It was one of those iconic compositions the Smiths contributed to the Gospel Music world. In a 1987 interview with *American Songwriter* magazine, Michael mentioned that the song relates well to kids – youth, in particular, who have lost friends in car accidents, in deaths or even going to summer camp and having to leave new friends. During his concerts, whenever Michael sings the refrain, “Friends are friends forever...”, the crowd cries and Michael gets choked up every time he sings it. But there was a backstory about this song. This song was written for Bill Jackson, a very close friend of the Smiths who was moving out of town. Bill was not just a family friend but a companion in the faith – he was part of a Bible Study group that Michael & Debbie attended. So, in honour of Bill, *Friends* was written on the very same day before they gave Bill a farewell party. And just like that! Debbie wrote the lyrics in 30 minutes and Michael put together the music in 4 minutes. The song was offered to Bill Jackson at the party.

I got thinking about friends and the meaning of friendship these past few days, especially as we have just celebrated our 171st anniversary. This church has been a haven of friendship– a place of prayer where kindred souls meet. A safe space for learning, nurturing and growing, where friends, young and old alike, have a place to call it their second home. A place where little Ainsley and Grandpa Simon can meet for worship and enjoy a wonderful time together. Recently I did a series of celebration of life services that gathered family and friends in a time of grieving and losing loved ones. These gatherings helped me understand that true friendships connect everyone - in life, in death and beyond death. A British publication once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. The winning definition reads: “A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out.”

One of the best quotes on friendship comes from the Gospel of John. “*This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.*” (Jn. 15:13). Jesus calls his disciples 'friends'

from the Greek word *philos*. Friendship was an important topic in the Greek and Roman cultures. For classical philosophers like Plato, friendship was a key social relationship. In the *Symposium*, Plato writes, “Only those who love wish to die for others.” In the first century, a “friend” was immediately understood as “one who loves.” This fundamental connection between love and friendship is an essential starting point for reclaiming friendship as a resource for faith and ethics for contemporary Christians. Friendship is a word of intimacy and depth. Jesus speaks of his disciples as 'friends', not followers, not servants, not subordinates, not second-class citizens. Just simply friends. As a friend, Jesus showed his disciples the very heart of God, which is self-giving, selfless love.

There are two dimensions of friendship in the first century Mediterranean world: the gift of one's life to one's friends and the use of frank and open speech. Both informed the way that the Gospel of John and its readers understood language about friendship. To be considered a friend was to be in a position of honour. Being a friend meant being treated as kin. To be a friend meant to look out for the welfare of the other, to put the other's needs on an equal footing with one's own. Friendship implied reciprocity as well -- to consider someone a friend meant counting on that person to return that level of concern and care. When Jesus calls the disciples "friends", he is investing them with this concern. Jesus relates to his followers in an egalitarian way. He has expressly rejected "servants" in favor of "beloved friends"-- a relationship of equality. In the foot washing, which is a story unique in the Gospel of John, Jesus offers himself completely to his disciples, assuming the social role of servant, in order to give a tangible shape to his love. Friends, not masters, wash the feet of guests, and in the foot washing, Jesus does the ultimate act of hospitality and friendship. Kris Lewis says: “Jesus calls his disciples friends and in doing so, he upsets the usual teacher-pupil relationship, he breaks boundaries, and he brings a new dimension to the bond he has with his disciples. No longer are they master and servant. Rather, they are ‘friends’ with all that entails.”

A middle school teacher asked her class to write imaginative definitions of a friend. These were the descriptions she received: “A friend is a pair of open arms in a society of armless people.” “A friend is a warm bedroll on a cold and frosty night.”

“A friend is a mug of hot coffee on a damp cloudy day.” “A friend is a beautiful orchard in the middle of the desert.” “A friend is a hot bath after you have walked 20 miles on a dusty road.” What is your definition of friendship? Are you experiencing that particular definition? What kind of a friend are you? What makes you a friend to others? What is it, do you think? Common values and interests? A shared sense of humor? Is it a similar world view? Is it just that you find yourself sharing a common time and place and it is merely convenient? Imagine what the world would be like if we all treat each other as friends.

Sallie McFague, in her book *Models of God*, discusses the characteristics of friendship in biblical and theological terms. McFague writes: “Friendship does not arise from necessity. We enter into it freely. Friendship is based on a disinterested love for the unique characteristics of the other. For modern readers, Jesus’ definition of love and friendship in John—to lay down one’s life for one’s friend—is completely exceptional. Most contemporary language about friendship does not speak in terms of life and death and martyrdom. Our day-to-day choices are not likely to lead to martyrdom, but each day we have to decide how we will spend our time, our resources, our talents, our lives.”

Being a true friend as Jesus modeled to his early followers may mean so many things. It could mean walking the extra mile, standing with the people who are losing, doing good that will receive no applause, building partnerships with people in Zambia, treating marginalized and disabled people as children of God, shopping for someone else’s groceries, reading stories to someone else’s children, taking flowers to someone who’s not a friend, visiting someone else’s mother in the nursing home, talking about faith when we would rather be silent, doing good for people who will do not good to us in return, praying not for an easier life but for strength to give our lives away. I could go on and on... And what do we get in return? Nothing fancy - just a dose of tremendous comfort and peace of mind knowing that you have made a difference in someone’s life. And yes – you gain a friend or two or more!

To think of Jesus as a friend means that we can find Jesus in our human friendships. We can see the face of Jesus in the face of others. We can catch a glimpse of God’s presence in our most common and mundane encounters with friends. Today is a wonderful time to celebrate the

friendships made and future friendships in this congregation and the community as a whole. Being a friend meant looking out for the welfare of the other, to put the other's needs on an equal footing with one's own.

I close with these words written by Debbie & Michael W. Smith from their song, *Friends*:

...friends are friends forever
If the Lord's the Lord of them
And a friend will not say never
'Cause the welcome will not end
Though it's hard to let you go
In the Father's hands we know
That a lifetime's not too long
To live as friends.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary group

Alyce Mackenzie, patheos.org.

Gail R. O'Day, "I Have Called You My Friends" Lynne M. Dolan, "Friendship"

Kris Lewis, The Witness