

Character and Virtue: Friendship

John 15:14-17

March 12, 2023

"Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."

Those words from Harvard professor of psychiatry Robert Waldinger summarize eighty years of research and the most extensive longitudinal survey of human flourishing ever conducted. The Grant Study has followed hundreds of Harvard graduates and inner-city Boston youth since the late 1930s, keeping tabs on everything from their career trajectories to their physical health to their family structures. And of the dozens of factors that they have studied, the one that most clearly correlates with happiness and health is, yes, good relationships. Friendship is at the core of human flourishing. Nothing measured matters more.

Now, likely this will not come as a surprise to you, but as with most virtues, knowing its importance does not guarantee the regular practice of friendship among us. On the contrary. Statistics bear this out as well: we are in the midst of what some sociologists call an epidemic of loneliness. Fully half of Americans report that they do not have meaningful social interactions on a daily basis. One half. And the numbers are highest among the young and the old, who are most likely to report suffering the harmful effects of social isolation. This reality has contributed to alarming increases in what are described as diseases and deaths of despair. Drug overdose, alcoholism, and suicide. My own experience as a pastor confirms in practice this data through painful personal stories.

The opposite of isolation is connection. The cure to an epidemic of loneliness is the creation of communities of belonging. And here's the good news in the Church: that is precisely what we are called to do and be together. Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus

declares his God-given purpose this way: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly"

People of faith are called to receive, embrace, and extend the gift of abundant life beyond mere existence, breathing in and breathing out. We are called to lives of meaning and purpose, of joy and gratitude. We simply cannot do this in isolation. Aristotle, in his work on ethics, dwells at length on friendship, describing it as "the virtue most necessary for life." Why, then, is it so difficult for us to practice?

As with any widespread social ill, the causes of our isolation are legion. I've lamented before the lack of embodied encounters and the inaccuracy of referring to our social media contacts as our "friends." I think we can add to that the forces of polarization and ideological sorting that mistake friendship with lockstep agreement on contentious issues. It is not the same thing. And of course, there is the unceasing pace of life in our time, the drive toward ever-greater productivity and material gain that can make cultivating relationships feel like a waste of precious time.

The witness of our scripture consistently challenges these misplaced priorities. From Genesis and the story of creation itself, we learn that God does not intend for the human creature to live in isolation. Through both testaments of our scriptures, the locus of the Spirit of God is in the midst of human community. God's presence travels with Israelites wandering through the wilderness, dwells among the people in the Promised Land, calls groups of disciples and congregations of believers. Not in isolation, but together. And the end of our scripture is like the beginning. In the Book of Revelation, the

voice of the Spirit declares, “See the home of God is among mortals.” For Christians, even the identity of God exhibits the gifts of community. One God in three persons. It is not good to live in isolation.

Jesus knew this. His life and his ministry testify to it. If you turn back in John’s Gospel, you will find that before the first chapter ends, he has gathered strangers to join him on the journey with a captivating invitation. Jesus turns to these strangers, and he says, “Come and see.” *Come and see.* Over the course of time, this community grows in breadth and in depth so that in this morning’s encounter, as he prepares his disciples for his departure, Jesus speaks to them with tenderness. He speaks to them with love. He gives them a new name. Friend. I call you friend.

I love this beautiful definition of friendship: It is “the discovery that I don’t want to tell my story—that I can’t tell my story—without your story.”¹

So, imagine this. Imagine that Jesus does not want to tell his story without our stories, and we cannot tell ours without his. Because of this, his story and our stories are woven together in ways that bring life in abundance. *You did not choose me, but I chose you. This is my commandment, that you love one another.*

A few weeks ago, I had a night out with our nine-year-old son Samuel. It was one of those rare occasions where it was just the two of us for the whole evening. Sam is a sensitive kid, often wiser than his years, and I think he sensed that evening that there was something that I wanted to talk about. And so, in the car on the way to dinner, he seized the moment before I had a chance to speak: “Dad, I don’t want to move again.” I was taken aback. Making this move five years ago was a challenge for a kid who loved life in Atlanta and a kid who values security and consistency. Curious, I asked him if he could explain why. “That’s easy, Dad. All my friends are here.”

Children know this, that abundant life is life lived in community. That like anything worth doing, like any virtue worth cultivating, the gift of friendship requires time and effort, dedication and commitment. For we

find ourselves deeply, and permanently, changed by the company we choose to keep. So, we ought to take the choice of that company seriously.

Aristotle describes friendship as a training in the virtues. (I love that.) That we hold a light for one another. That we become over time what we practice in community. Stanley Hauerwas writes: “Friendship is not just a relationship; it is a moral enterprise. People spend their lives together doing good because that is what they see their lives to be.” Reflected in the friendships that shape their understanding of themselves. Abundant life. Life with purpose and meaning. Life lived in community.

Of course, this does not mean that friendship leads to lives of uninterrupted joy or unlimited pleasure. Genuine friendship means pushing and being pushed. It means holding accountable and being held accountable. Sometimes, friendship means the hard work of staying present in the midst of pain.

Last month, the New York Times columnist David Brooks published an essay that took my breath away. The title is a question that prepares readers for what was to come, “How Do You Serve a Friend in Despair?” Brooks described his friendship with Peter Marks, a friendship that began at age eleven in summer camp and lasted for five decades. Their relationship reminded me of the one described in First Samuel between David and Jonathan. It was a soul-level friendship, an unlikely combination that just by God’s grace worked. Brooks narrates how, over time, a deep depression overwhelmed his friend. How at first, he tried to cheer Peter up, offering advice and what psychologists call “positive reframing.” In time, David learned, in his words, “that a friend’s job is not to cheer the person up. It is to acknowledge the reality of the situation; to hear, respect, and love the person; it is to show that you haven’t given up on him or her; it is to show that you haven’t walked away.”

That is friendship. Sadly, Peter’s illness was too great, and ultimately, he took his own life. A death of despair. Brooks writes powerfully, testifying to the depth of friendship and the reality of grief. He

writes, "Pete's death has been a cause of great disorientation. He'd been a presence for practically my whole life, and now that steady friendship I took for granted is gone. It is as if I went to Montana and suddenly the mountains had disappeared."

The cost of love is grief. But the grief we experience is yet another way of bearing witness to abundant life. The promise of faith is that relationships last. That connection matters. And here is how I know that is true: because my vocation involves walking with families through the process of planning memorial services to celebrate lives and comfort the grieving. And without exception, there is something holy that happens when the stories shared and the memories preserved are about human connection and relationship—about friendship.

We do not dwell on professional accolades, or possessions acquired, or success achieved. We do not emphasize positions or perspectives held. What we do is tell stories about time shared with those we love. We bear witness to the gift of community. It comes down to friendship. Always friendship. Abundant life. Life that lasts. Life worth living.

So, this week, make a phone call. Call a friend you've been missing. Do not let the distance of time or space hold you back. Do not let the sting of unresolved disagreement or past disappointment hold you back. Do not wait to pursue the life of abundance, the virtue of friendship.

In the middle of Lent every year, I remember as a kid sitting in the sanctuary of Unity Presbyterian Church and singing these words that always felt haunting to me: "Jesus walked this lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself. Nobody else could walk it for him. He had to walk it by himself." The Gospel bears witness that the life of Jesus ends in the despair of isolation and the pain of abandonment. He suffers the depth of human grief and loss. All by himself.

And yet, as he approaches that end, Jesus gathers his disciples. He speaks tenderly. He calls them friend. He promises to return to them. His story will not be complete without them. Ours will not be complete without him. And, because of this, we belong to each other. It is the path of friendship. It is the way to life abundant. Amen.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas