

“I Have Called You Friends”

John 15:12-17

2nd Sunday in Lent

February 25, 2024

Westminster, Greenville

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As we continue our sermon series this morning on The Fabric of Faith, our topic today is friendship.

Faith...as friendship.

“I do not call you servants any longer...but I have called you friends.”

That’s what Jesus says to his disciples on the last night of his life.

Truth be told, I’ve always struggled with this text.

What does Jesus mean, when he says we are his friends?

I find it much easier in my own faith—I’m not saying this has to be true for you, I just know that it’s true for me—I find it much easier to say that Jesus is—

my Lord,
my Savior,
the risen Christ,
the Son of the living God...

But to say that Jesus is my friend—I get stuck on this.

After all, friendship is a two-way street.

We all know what it’s like for a friend to be there for us when we’re hurting or going through a hard time...and they don’t necessarily fix your problem.

But they walk with you through your problem.

To say that Jesus does that for us, as our friend?

No problem.

But friendship is a two-way street.

And I know that I'm not always going to be there for Jesus, the way that Jesus is there for me. I have a hard time picturing Jesus—needing me—in the same way that I need Jesus.

So I get hung up on this, when Jesus calls me his friend.

Look, let's have a little fun with this.

I've got a couple songs about friendship in mind this morning.

And I'm going to read—NOT SING, but read—

part of the lyrics, and I want you to see if you can identify both the song and the artist who sings the song.

*You just call out my name
And you know, wherever I am
I'll come runnin'
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there
You've got a friend*

What's the name of that song?

“You've Got a Friend”

Who sings that song?

Many of us remember it as a James Taylor song.

Carole King actually wrote it.

James Taylor heard it. Loved it. Did his own version of it.

So if you said James Taylor or Carole King, you get credit...

It's friendship as faithfulness, friendship as loyalty, friendship as a bond that can never be broken, especially when we're in need...and if that's what it means for Jesus to be our friend, then I've got no problem with our text.

But friendship is a two-way street.

So here are some of the lyrics from the second song:

*And we drive and drive
Until we found a town far enough away
And we talk and window shop
'Till I forgotten all their names
I don't know who I'm gonna talk to now at school
But I know I'm laughing
On the car ride home with you
Don't know how long it's gonna take to feel okay
But I know I had the best day with you today...*

Does anyone know that song?

It's called "The Best Day," and it's by a different Taylor, Taylor Swift.

Now, I'm no "Swiftie" by any stretch of the imagination, but when Time magazine put her on the cover last December as its Person of the Year, it occurred to me that I did not know ANY of her music, could not name ANY of her songs... so for the sake of cultural proficiency, I started listening to some of her music in the car on my home from work each day.

And I've been doing this for the past two months.

(Let me pause right here...yes, your pastor just confessed that he sometimes listens to Taylor Swift on way home and is now quoting her in a sermon...if you had told me that I would be doing this 3 months ago, I would have been just as astonished as you.)

Getting back to the song...in the part that I just quoted, Taylor Swift remembers being 13 years old. It's the day she asked *her friends* if they wanted to go to the mall with her.

And they all tell her no, that they have other plans, so sorry we can't go.

So her mom takes her to the mall.

And when she and her mom are at the mall, who does Taylor see?

All of her friends.

The very people she invited to join her at the mall.

It's a devastating moment.

The kind of moment that gets seared in a 13 year-old's memory.

So her mom drives her to another mall, far away from those so-called friends.¹

*And we talk and window shop
'Till I forgotten all their names...*

It's a song about her mother's love and loyalty, to be sure—but it's also a song about how friends don't always behave with that same love and loyalty—which brings me back to our text.

“I have called you friends...”

Why does Jesus do it?

¹ The background about Taylor Swift's song, “The Best Day,” comes from “The Daily” podcast by *The New York Times*, “The Year of Taylor Swift,” December 15, 2023.

Jesus speaks these words on the last night of his life.
When he knows that Judas will betray him.
And Peter will deny him.

Why does Jesus say to them: you are my friend?
After all, friendship is a two-way street.

Maybe it doesn't have so much to do with what Jesus needs.
Maybe it has more to do with what we need.

Because if Jesus says that each of us is his friend, it also means
that Jesus is asking us to be friends with one another.

Do you remember how our text for today begins?

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have
loved you.”

In other words, following Jesus isn't just about our relationship
with Jesus.

It's about our relationship with each other.
It's about how we make connections with one another in God's
Church.

It's why the Women's retreat, taking place this weekend at
Montreat, is so important.

It's why the Men's retreat—scheduled for two months from now,
yes, this is a shameless plug for you men out there in the pews to get
over yourself and sign up for the retreat—it's why that retreat is so
important.

It's why the WestConnect ministry—our new small group ministry—is one of the places where we need to put our time and efforts and our energy in the years to come.

Because I think Jesus knew that what really makes a difference in people's lives...is not only the family into which you're born, and the family you help create...but also having good friends. And what makes a difference in a church's life is when we are not simply worship attendees...but people who take the time to be friends with one another.

The next class of elders just finished their training, and at the beginning of April, they will be ordained and installed. At that time, they will be asked a series of ordination questions...promises that they will make.

One of those questions goes like this:

“Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry...?”

According to Jesus, we don't get to just stand off by ourselves, in our own little silos...and have a private relationship with him. When Jesus calls us friends, he asks us to know one another, make connections with each other, befriend one another.

Even if the person in the pew in front of you is nothing like you.
It's a powerful experience.
For a stranger to become a friend.

Do you recall what happens each Sunday when one of your pastors makes the announcements at the start of worship?

We ask you to sign something.
“Sign in on the writing pad”...is that what we say?

No, no, what do we say?

Please sign in on the Ritual of Friendship pad located in your pew.

It is an invitation to each of you...if you don't know the person sitting in the same pew as you, or in the pew next to you...to reach out to that person.

To get to know them.

Do you know what can happen when a stranger becomes a friend?

It's not just a nice thing to do.

It can be a life-saving thing to do.

I recall how Peter Lovenheim once described his comfortable, suburban neighborhood.

Large lots. Nice homes.

But all was not so nice behind every home.

One night on this comfortable block, a mother of two was shot and killed. Not by a burglar, but by her husband. He took her life, and then his own.

When news of this disaster got around, Peter Lovenheim realized that he did not know that family at all. They practically lived next door...and he had no idea who they were!

Turns out they were two successful doctors.

They went jogging together, did the occasional car pool for neighborhood kids...everything looked good ON THE OUTSIDE. But inside the house, the marriage was ending, and the husband was emotionally unstable.

During that awful night, the wife had a feeling that her husband was **NOT** in good shape.

So she called a friend who lived 20 minutes away, leaving message after message to see if she could spend the night. This friend was unreachable by phone, so the woman went home, and disaster struck.

Now it was plain bad luck that the friend wasn't home.
But Lovenheim was disturbed by something else.

Why hadn't the woman reached out to a neighbor?
Why weren't her neighbors—like Lovenheim—her friends?

The whole thing troubled him enough, he set out on a mission: to get to know his neighbors, and hopefully make some new friends.

How did he do this?
That's the kicker.

He went up to his unknown neighbors, and he asked if he could spend the night.

That's right.

He approached people who had no idea who HE was, on his very own block...and he asked if he could sleep over on their couch.

Now what would YOU say if someone on your block whom you didn't know called you out of the blue, and said, "May I sleep on your sofa?"

Of course, some neighbors turned him down.
But more than half said sure.

And what happened then?

Well...

Something simple...and yet profound.

He got to know people on his own block that he didn't know before. And he found human suffering that was literally right next door.

- Behind one door was a real estate agent who was considering leaving her husband.
- Behind another door was a single mother who was bravely battling cancer.
- Behind a third door was a lonely, retired doctor.

And after a bit of time, and after a number of sleepovers, something fascinating happened. As one person put it, “the fabric of the neighborhood” changed.²

For example, that lonely, retired doctor?

He ended up caring for the single mother with cancer, driving her places when she could not drive herself. In other words, Lovenheim and his neighbors didn't just start waving “Hi” to the people who lived nearby.

They started becoming friends.

² Peter Lovenheim, *In the Neighborhood: The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time*, New York: Perigee, 2010. This summary of the book, while not a duplicate quote, is greatly indebted to Lillian Daniel's review of the book, “Suburban Search for Meaning,” in *The Christian Century*, July 27, 2011.

Now...that's not just the point of being good neighbors.
It's the point of being God's Church.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that I struggle with Jesus calling me his friend. After all, friendship is a two-way street.

Do you remember that?

That's what I said at the start of the sermon.
Am I allowed to change my mind at the end of the sermon?

Because I got to thinking about it this week.

How many of you have heard about the polarization in our country that's getting worse these days?

How many of you have heard of the loneliness epidemic taking place in our society these days?

How many of you believe that Jesus is, at this very moment, growing a Church community here at W. Augusta Place and Augusta Street...that goes beyond political differences, and economic differences, and sexual orientation differences, and educational differences, because Jesus wants his Church committed to something much greater than those differences?

How many of you believe that Jesus is, right now, doing everything Jesus can do to create a Church community where strong connections are essential, where not only giving money to our neighbors in need, but getting to know our neighbors, and befriending our neighbors...where all that is the name of the game?

How many of you believe that's the kind of community that the risen Christ is trying to create around here?

Can I get an “Amen” to that??

If you believe that, then you know why I’ve changed my mind.

Because what Jesus needs is a two-way street.

Jesus can’t do this on his own.

He needs help...from a few of his friends.

Do you see any friends of Jesus in this room here today?

Amen.