



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

November 22, 2015

“No Greater Love” (The Friendship Series)

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This morning I want to talk about friendship. It's the beginning of a new sermon series called “Friendship” leading up to Christmas.

When Jesus came to earth He said an extraordinary thing: “I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:15)

Jesus wants to be our friend! Isn't it mind-boggling that we could be friends with God? And you know what's more amazing? God wants to be friends with us! Friendship with God is the key to the Christian life.

Some places may say that God is like a strict disciplinarian, or one who works you hard, or one who says you have to earn your salvation, or one who says you have to follow all of these rules and laws that say don't dance, don't drink, don't smoke, don't chew, nor go with girls who do. But Jesus Jesus isn't like that He is fully human and fully God, says God loves you. He wants to be your friend. Mind-boggling! I can be a friend of God!

When publishers want their magazines to sell, they normally DON'T feature stories about friendships on the cover. No, cover stories are usually about who is in love with whom, or who is having sex with whom. If it were summertime, cover stories would be about how to

have a good tan, nice hair, narrow hips, flat abs or broad shoulders. These are the topics that interest readers and generate sales. What drives the magazine business after all is how to make money.

But rarely would you see a magazine that says on the cover that Harrison Ford's best friend is his neighbor down the street who happens to sell insurance; or that J-Lo likes having lunch with Susie; or that Brad Pitt likes playing mah jong with Fred; or that Lady Gaga likes to have coffee with her long-time buddy Phyllis. There is a part in society that says, “Who cares about friendship?”

We want to know who is sleeping with whom, who is divorcing and marrying who, what the celebrities are wearing, how to have a good tan and flat abs, or how to make a lot of money without doing much work.

The Bible, on the other hand, talks about real friendship. Today's verse that we will delve into is John 15:13: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

1) THE CURIOSITY OF FRIENDSHIP

Friendship in the Bible is curious to many because friendship is held up so high, even higher than family. This is especially revolutionary of the Bible writers because the Bible was written in a Jewish context where family meant everything. But even way back when the Old Testament was written in the years of B.C., we see these

culture-busting verses like these:

Proverbs 17:17-18 “A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity. Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin.”

Proverbs 18: 24 “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Do you see what the writer of the Proverbs is saying? A friend can be closer than a relative. They stick closer to you.

The Hebrew word for “stick,” by the way, is the same for “cleave,” like when it says in Genesis 2:24 about marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife.” It's the same word of covenantal relationship where it's so tight that it's like two pieces of flypaper stuck to each other.

That is why, as a former singles pastors, I say to singles—the Bible talks about friendship in the same way as for married people...cleave to one another! You can be single and not live a second-rate life, if you have good friends who stick or cleave closer than a brother or sister to you. The Bible says it is just as good, if not better, than being married (1 Cor 7:8). Again, the same word for “stick” and “cleave” is offered to both singles and married people.

So why can a friend be closer than a relative? Because unlike relatives, friends are chosen. You don't choose your relatives, but you choose your friends and your friends choose you. You are close to relatives because you have to be close to them. You're born into the family! It's blood. It's tribal. It's a genetic community. You gotta be close to your relatives because you have to.

Ah, but friends are different. You choose them. And truly good and mature friends love you at all times and stick closer to you than a brother or a sister.

While people fall into love, you don't fall into friendship. You choose your friends and they have to choose you, and it is normally based on common interests. It's not driven by hormones or from a mating instinct like in romance. No, it's driven by a basic need to have a friend. It's built in us to want to have friends and to be a friend to others. We accept our friends for who they are in spite of their faults and whether they look good or not.

2) THE COST OF FRIENDSHIP

Today's verse says, *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* (John 15:13)

When Jesus says that we are to lay down our life for others, He didn't mean only dying physically because you could only do that once! What He meant was we are to give up our time and energy and treasure to repeatedly help our friends. When we give up something precious for a friend, it is like laying down our life for that person.

It could mean giving up time, sharing your talents or skills or some of your treasure. It could mean a tithe to help your church to reach your friends or

to make friends for Jesus. The cost of friendship means giving up our time and energy for others. It means at times we will be inconvenienced.

Today, we received more than 30 new covenant partners" (which is our new term for church members) into our church ohana. In a sense, we are welcoming spiritual immigrants in our community; spiritual refugees who are looking for a new home. Some of them will tell you that they had a bad experience at their last church. Others will say they wanted to give up on God but didn't because their faith got strengthened here at First Prez.

It would be easy to say, "Let's just keep our church the way it is because we're comfortable with each other, so let's not take in new members.." And, believe it or not, some churches actually are like that. They say, "Let's just say keep the church at 100 people." The average American church, by the way, is fewer than 100 people.

But if we are really trying to fulfill our mission statement of "love God, love people, and reach the world for Jesus Christ," then we must always be willing to take in spiritual refugees no matter where they come from, knowing that God is vetting their hearts. This is not a political statement but a spiritual statement.

The reason we moved here to Ko'olau was to make room for more people and not stay in our own cliques. Friendship is a process that involves getting to know each other and wanting to ultimately hang out with each other. And a key to building friendship is to be willing to sacrifice part of our lives to help one another.

The late pastor and scholar Ray Stedman said: "When we go out of our way to meet a friend's needs, we are laying our life down for him. When we love a friend, it means we are sharing our lives and the burdens and

secrets of our inner hearts with them.

"If Jesus becomes our 'friend,' we want to share our life with Him. We share everything that is happening to us, what struggles and fears we are experiencing, as well as the joys. This is the characteristic of the love Jesus wants us to understand. ("Discovery Bible Study Book", "Expository Studies in John 13-17", "Secrets of the Spirit"; by Ray C. Stedman. Publisher is Word Books in cooperation with Discovery Foundation, Palo Alto CA, p 90)

3) THE CARE OF FRIENDSHIP

Believe it or not, it takes a lot of care to nurture friendship. Friendship doesn't go on autopilot.

Two weekends ago, at the Men's Retreat, I was talking to the men about friendship and how there has to be nurture, cultivation, and maintenance for any kind of relationship, whether for a spouse, family, or friends. And the Bible is very clear on how we are to care for our friendship.

Here's what it says in Proverbs about friendship and notice in these four verses how there has to be some self-awareness of what is proper and what is not in nurturing friendships:

a) Proverbs 25:17 *"Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house—too much of you, and he will hate you."*

We need to have an awareness, or the courtesy or etiquette not to overstay our welcome in a friend's house. No one will tell you that you're overstaying. You'll just have to know on your own that it is time to leave. That's self-awareness. If you are a transplant to Hawaii, you have to have self-awareness when it comes to knowing local culture and how to get along.

b) Proverbs 25:20 *"Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart."*

I remember when my mom had just lost her husband, my dad, and one of my cousins came up to her and said, "So, how is the new bachelorette?" Totally inappropriate! He tried to be cheery when my mom was grieving with a heavy heart! Don't do that!

c) Proverbs 26:18 *"Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows
19 is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, "I was only joking!"*

You have to have an awareness when it's proper or improper to use humor. If you are always saying something sarcastic, cutting, or off color, and then say, "Oh, I was only joking," you will not have deep friendships. That can turn off people and they won't tell you. Neither will they want to be your friend. There has to be self-monitoring.

d) Proverbs 27:14 *"If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse."*

I love this verse! You can't just walk into people's homes and shout good morning real loudly and be super cheerful! It's irritating, especially to those people who are not morning people and who haven't had their coffee! And you need the self-awareness that you are irritating if you do that.

We really need to work to nurture friendship. Many people work so hard at their business or so hard on their family but not on their friendships, and that's why they don't have that many friends.

So what happens when they retire? They may live in a retirement home with strangers. Is that the goal? Work hard but no friends, so when you are retired you live with strangers?

And remember how the Bible says that the bond with friends is stronger

than family because as many parents discover when they are retired, their grown kids may not want to be around them that much. One person said to me that when they visit their grown children and the grandkids it is about three days max that everyone can handle. Making and nurturing friends should be a prime goal in our lives.

4) THE CAUSE OF FRIENDSHIP

The cause is this: We are to bring friends to Jesus. As we bring ourselves closer to Christ, we ought to be bringing our friends along with us, because Jesus is the best friend someone could want. In the end, the question is: are we bringing our friends closer to God or away from God?

Hence, like an intimate triad, we are close to Christ who is close to our friends and with whom we are close to also. Close to friendship with others in Christ and close to Christ too. Wow, that's powerful.

That's also what the church is. It's a group of friends who follow Christ, and in Christ we are close to one another so close that we stick closer as friends than a brother or a sister.

Friendship is a multiplier. The cause of friendship is to bring our friends to Jesus so we will multiply. And that's why we always tell you to invite your friends to any of our programs and especially to big gatherings like the Christmas Eve service or the Thanksgiving Potluck so they might feel the love of God in our gatherings.

In the 8th chapter of Luke we read of a story of a demoniac (a person possessed by evil spirits) who was living among the tombs. He was super strong in that he could break chains put on him. But Jesus healed him and cast out all of the demons inside of him into a herd of 2000 pigs (that is why we have pigs on our land here so

in case we do exorcisms we need some pigs to throw demons in). The healed man, the former demoniac, wanted to follow Jesus. But Jesus told him not to and said instead:

Luke 8:39 "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

Well, that man was the first convert on the Gentile side of the Lake of Galilee. He told ALL OF HIS FRIENDS AND EVEN STRANGERS about how Jesus restored him.

In the next chapter, Luke chapter 9 what do we see? FIVE-THOUSAND PEOPLE gathered to hear Jesus. Why? I contend it's because of the healed demoniac who went all around the countryside to tell people he had been healed by Jesus, and to come and see.

When you are touched by God, you should be telling people to come learn more of this Jesus who heals and loves and forgives and gives purpose in life. You are saying: come and see, come and see, come and see.

Friendship can be a ministry multiplier if we bring our friends to Christ. If we don't tell our friends about Jesus and what He has done for us, then shame on us for keeping to ourselves all that we know about and the joy we have in Jesus.

Another cause of friendship is to bring ourselves closer to Christ.

I close with this story. As you all know I love films. I went to USC film school, and I used to be on TV every day. Actually I still am because of our sermon videos on KALO-TV every day. sometimes are 11 am, sometimes at 7:30 pm, and at times at 2 am when I go against I Love Lucy.

Anyway, basically I like media and films.

O my shelf is, get ready for this, a DVD set of Universal Studios Classic Monster Collection!

It features – you ready for this? –Frankenstein, The Wolfman, The Mummy, The Invisible Man, Phantom of the Opera, and Dracula (with Bela Lugosi saying in his great voice, “I would like to drink your blood.”).

But one of the best films in the series is—you ready for this—The Bride of Frankenstein, starring Boris Karloff as Frankenstein! (And you young people, who are not connoisseurs of cinema, are wondering, “Who the heck is that?”)

The movie has an incredible, poignant scene about friendship. Frankenstein the Monster is in the woods and comes upon a cabin. Inside is a man playing a violin. We discover that violin player is blind. The blind man says, “You are welcome my friend, whoever you are.”

He can’t see Frankenstein’s deformity and he accepts him. He keeps calling Frankenstein “friend.”

The blind man says, “Perhaps you are afflicted like me. I can’t see and you can’t speak, is that it? You stay here and I will get you some food. We shall be friends.”

He says, “I have prayed many times that God would send me a friend and I shall look after you.”

And then the blind man prays with Frankenstein as we hear the strains of the song Ave Maria. What a powerful and poignant scene.

The blind man in the next scene teaches Frankenstein how to say bread and wine (It’s almost like a first communion service). Then the blind man teaches Frankenstein the words “friend, good, friend, good, alone bad,

friend good.” What a beautiful poignant scene—two people with disabilities together.

But then, as it would happen, two hunters who have lost their way show up. They see Frankenstein and call him a monster and try to shoot him in the house. In the ensuing fight inside the cottage between Frankenstein and the hunters, dry branches inside fall on the fireplace and start a fire. The cottage gets engulfed in flames perhaps killing all except Frankenstein. Frankenstein runs outside the burning cottage shouting in despair, “Friend, Friend, Friend!”

We can only imagine his blind friend is gone. Oh, the pathos, the emotion, and the poignancy of it all. We want to cry in agony with Frankenstein. His only friend was making the monster more human; this one friend who, like Jesus, accepted him unconditionally and wanted to be His friend.

And so it is with us. When we find a true friend in Christ, He accepts us with all of our imperfections and faults, and makes us more human, more of a friend to others. And like the blind man and Frankenstein eating together – that is what the church is all about. In a sense we are like Frankenstein. We are all here with our emotional deformities and the sinful monster inside of us.

Yet, God has called us together in a community called church to help and support one another as friends. There are no cool people and non-cool people like we thought in high school. No, we are ALL UNCOOL people with our own deformities and shortcomings, strengths, weaknesses, and monster-like selfishness, and we are called to be together as friends.

And then when we realize how much Jesus loves us, hopefully we will want to tell all of our friends. Can we accept Jesus as a true friend? This is God who loves us, gave up His life for

us. Two thousand years ago, God came to this earth in the form of Jesus to be our friend and savior.

But the evil of humanity wanted to kill him, and Jesus knew that if He gave His life for us, the terminal illness called sin would not hinder us from being eternal friends with God. So Jesus gave up His life. He was tortured and crucified for our sake on a cross.

For as the Bible says: “*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” (John 15:13)

Lets pray.