



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

November 29, 2015

"Sacred Spaces" (The Friendship Series) - John 15:2-14

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**F**or the past couple of months we have been looking at Jesus' words in John 15. More recently, Pastor Dan has been touching on Jesus' friendship with us. And what Jesus says in our focus verse of the morning (v. 14) is that He wants us to respond to *His* friendship by living into His command; that is, the command to love one another *as He loved us* (as we see in verse 12).

When you look at verse 13, where it is says, "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends,*" it can be so wonderful and inspiring—almost to the point of being idealistic.

But I've been very fortunate to have such a friendship in my life. I have a friend who literally put his neck on the line for me. It was in my freshman year of high school and I had gotten into some trouble with guys who belonged to a real rough crowd. They called themselves the LSDs. One of their guys wanted to go at it with me at school. So before classes we duked it out. When it was over, let's just say he was on his back looking up.

The glory of the victory was short-lived however because, as you probably know, the thing about gangs is: when you hit one you hit them all.

So when we got inside the school this guy's friends lined up on both sides of the hallway. That's when I knew I was in for it. Sure enough, in seconds fists and feet started flying and I quickly became a freshman piñata.

Amidst my being pummeled, and unbeknownst to me, my best friend had jumped in and beat up one of the guys who was trying to pounce on me. The problem was the older brother of that guy he beat up was a major delinquent and twice our size. And as I said, when you hit one, you hit them all.

As you can imagine they came after my friend a few days later and made my friend pay for sticking up for me. I'll never forget that. What a great thing to have a friend like that.

Now some 40+ years later we remain close friends, and fortunately we don't need fists these days to express our friendship. Instead we use listening ears, wise words and shared laughter.

When my mother passed away last month he was at the funeral. And after the burial he went far out of his way to spend an entire day with me. In that time together we talked about being fathers, about spiritual things, about politics, and about some of the deep

disappointments of our souls that have happened over the years. We talked about real life.

And here's the thing: In all that time together we never went to church, *but* the space between us was as sacred as any sanctuary.

And that's the thing about loving each other as Christ loves us. It opens up Sacred Spaces between people—places where love, growth, healing, and hope can flourish.

And this is what I want to explore with you this morning: How to live verses 12-14 by being a person who creates Sacred Spaces in our world. The skills and competence for doing this are vital to our world today because far too many of the people whom Jesus loves experience violent spaces, lonely spaces, empty spaces, painful spaces.

Now here is something that is very important to keep in mind as we think of these lofty words of Jesus to His disciples. He doesn't just give His directives in some sort of religious vacuum. He knows the human condition. He knows what it takes socially, emotionally, relationally, and psychologically to thrive and live into the highest levels of humanity.

**W**e forget that that Jesus was the greatest Sociologist and Psychologist to ever live. And I'm convinced that it is His knowledge of these things which inform His directives to us. He doesn't just throw out some arbitrary commands. They come out of something. I think they come out of Him knowing what we humans need to flourish. Let me explain what I mean.

In 1938, researchers at Harvard's medical school began a longitudinal study that aimed to answer the questions of what factors lead to an "optimum" life. That is, what physiological and psychological traits present in a man's younger years will predict his chances of living a long, flourishing life?

And here is what they found: "It was **the capacity for intimate relationships** that predicted flourishing in **ALL** aspects of these men's lives."

Perhaps this is why Jesus put His charge to love as *He* loved in the form of a command—not because it makes us "super spiritual" or religious, but it makes us flourish and thrive as human beings.

The reality is that without relationships of the nature Jesus desires, people suffer—emotionally, soulfully, relationally, and even physically. I know that sounds dramatic but listen to this. Studies show that, "Social isolation is as significant to mortality as smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, and lack of physical exercise." This is what the lack of loving relationships can do to you.

And "adults who do not cultivate nurturing relationships have

premature death rates twice as high as those with frequent caring contacts." Do you think Jesus knows this about the human situation?

I bring in all this science not to depress us but because I truly believe that beneath Christ's directives there are very real biological, sociological and psychological realities that He considers and that undergird His words to us.

I know that the rise of the Internet has given uku billions of ways for people to "connect" with each other, but here is the startling thing: despite such access to so much "connecting", one in three Americans over the age of 45 identifies as chronically lonely. That is up from one in five just a decade ago.

What's going on that so many people still feel so disconnected and lonely?

The church, over the years, has tried to meet these relational needs with a lot of things, including having large gatherings. But one of the things I have noticed over the last three decades of ministry is that even though we attend large gatherings, big conferences, or even have nice small groups, the feelings of isolation, aloneness, and detachment remain for so many.

One writer refers to this dilemma as "Crowded Loneliness". Does anyone know what I'm talking about?

My point is, we as Christians simply cannot just seek to gather, but we need to gather in a way where our soul experiences God's intentions for human relationship.

And this is why I bring up the notion of Sacred Spaces.

For me, Sacred Spaces are those times and situations where we take a very intentional and real interest in each other. It is that Space where you can share your deepest fears, as well as your greatest dreams, knowing fully that as you share you will be taken seriously and met with the love of Christ. It is the Space where you are loved for who you are, not for who you are supposed to be—loved as that broken, wounded, struggling person who you truly may be.

When you have that Scared Space you never feel like you have to hide or wear a phony Christian mask.

Of all the different ways and means we can create these Sacred Spaces, let me just suggest two unique, but essential elements: Hospitality and Curiosity.

In its most basic meaning, biblical hospitality is to truly welcome someone. Let's read Luke 15:1-2, as it gives is a great snapshot of what I mean. "*Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear Him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

The word, "Welcome" doesn't mean Jesus simply said "Hi" to these folks or simply shook their hands. But the word means to accept a person, as they are, with friendliness. And this is why the Pharisees and Teachers were "muttering"—because Jesus was showing an unprecedented acceptance to riff raff.

**A**fter all, tax collectors were deeply despised people. They were seen as traitorous to the Jews and corrupt as the day is long. What in the world is Jesus doing in welcoming traitors?!

The word “sinners” (intentionally written in quotes in the verse) didn’t mean it was just for people who made some mistakes here or there, who “don’t go to church” or “cuss a little too much”. This word was the label Jewish people used to refer to the low-lives, the disreputable, and the damned.

But if you look at the words here, Jesus is so at ease with these kinds of folks—welcoming and sharing meals and sharing His wisdom. This is what I meant when I said that He loves them where they’re at, not where they are supposed to be. He loved tax collectors *before* they left tax collection. He loved adulterers *even as* they were caught red-handed. He loved the prideful, the arrogant, the prostitute, etc. *as* they were these things, *before* they got their act together. This is indeed true Christian hospitality.

For the early church, hospitality was so important to the Christian life that the Apostle Paul makes it an actual *requirement* for leadership. I Timothy 3:2 says, “*Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach...*”

Again, this kind of hospitality goes beyond merely greeting someone or having them over for tea and cookies. In fact, the word we translate as “hospitality” in the New Testament, is *Philoxenos*. It literally means, “love of strangers”.

One of the things I like about this compound word is that it does not convey the idea of “tolerate the stranger” or merely “say hello to the stranger”, but *love* the stranger, as in engage the stranger.

Sometimes we can go for months to a church and feel like a stranger. A number of years ago when I moved to L.A., my family and I attended a church for about ten months. We ended up leaving there because it was so hard to connect with people (and trust me, my wife and I are no wall flowers; we usually can relate to people). The thing is, when we left *no one noticed*. How do I know? Because I still got mail informing me it was our turn to teach Sunday school six *months after* I left the church!

Don’t get me wrong, I got “greeted” every week at that church, but was I welcomed, was I ever truly known? You can greet anyone, but it takes the heart of Jesus to truly welcome someone.

At its core, godly hospitality deals with mutual love and reverence—not just saying “Hello”. One Benedictine monk defines it, in part, like this: “Hospitality is a call to revere what is sacred in every person ever born...Mutual reverence, not warm, fuzzy, social comforts is the climate of (godly) hospitality...We reverence people not because they are pleasant, but because God is present in them.”

Do you see how this tries to frame the issue of godly hospitality, from the starting point of the Imago Dei, the Image of God—that is, from the place of people’s inherent Sacred Value? We need to start there when we relate to people.

If we don’t value the stranger, we can hardly end up loving them. In fact, we can end up going in ungodly directions to deal with them. Let me elaborate on this because this is crucial to following Christ’s directive in John 15.

I think scripture makes it clear that *every* person is a sacred child of God (if not by faith then at least by creation); who is loved with an unbreakable, unfailing love; and in whom and for whom God is presently at work. Do you believe God is presently at work in and for the worst person you can think of? These features are the central and unchanging realities of *any* human being.

I may be sounding like Captain Obvious here, but my point is that hospitality is looking at, and valuing, and responding to people like these people (pictures of people whom many folks struggle to even embrace) with the profound conviction that this person is made in God’s image no matter what they have done to mar that image. That this person is valued and loved by God no matter how they have acted contrary to their value. That this person is sacred and deserves to be treated with reverence no matter where they come from, how they got here, and no matter their past.

When we take on this mindset toward these and others, we don’t just create warm fuzzies; we create Sacred Spaces for a new kind of humanity to arise through Christ and through His church. Hospitality is not just to make people feel good. Jesus is on a mission to create an entire new humanity, and part of how He is doing that is through our hospitality.

**T**hink again of Jesus with the tax collectors and “sinners.” What does He see that others can’t? I think this is one of the things that made Jesus’ ministry so powerful and far reaching. He did not see ‘classes’ of people, like tax collector, “sinner”, prostitute, liberal, conservative, or whatever. He saw a child of God worth loving.

If you don’t believe that, just think of Jesus at the cross. He didn’t say, “Father forgive most of these guys, but the real bad ones, just wipe them out.” He asked for forgiveness for ALL of them. You can’t get any worse than killing God. Yet even then, Jesus sees people worth forgiving, worth loving. What does He know? What is He looking at? What does He see that we cannot?

You see, if we don’t focus on these central and unchanging features of a person we may respond to folks according to what I call their “adjectives.” Let me explain what I mean.

Sometimes we tend to look at each other and focus on things like this: GOOD Child; BAD Child; CONSERVATIVE Child; LIBERAL Child; ADDICTED Child; ILLEGAL Child; MUSLIM Child.

The adjectives differentiate us one from another, which at times helps to express our uniqueness. However, on the other hand, without the heart, eyes and hospitality of Jesus flowing through our veins, too much emphasis on the adjectives can also create distance, hurt, and perhaps even destruction.

And part of what Jesus does through His example is that He gets us to relate to each other in terms of our main noun: Child.

So perhaps a Jesus view of others might look like this: Good CHILD; Bad CHILD ; Conservative CHILD; Liberal CHILD; Addicted CHILD; Illegal CHILD; Muslim CHILD. You get the idea.

When we focus on the “noun”, Sacred Spaces and relationships have a way better shot of being created.

A few years back I worked with the homeless in a park near where I lived. And quite frankly it was not easy at first to get beyond the adjectives. Dirty person. Smelly person. Addicted person. Mentally Ill person. But as time went on I wanted to know more about their “person”. And so I would ask them about their story, about who they were, etc. And they became more “noun” and less “adjective”.

And at one point one of the guys I got to know well passed away. And the people at the park asked me to do the funeral. There is no way they ask me to ask to do a funeral if I’m staring at adjectives every time I met with them. Stare at the Noun and you may be surprised how God can use you.

Christian writer and spiritual director Larry Crabb, sums it up well: “A spiritual community, a church, is full of broken people who...journey together with their wounds and worries and washouts visible, **but** are able to see *beyond* the brokenness to something alive and good, something whole.”

Seeing ‘beyond’ the brokenness is crucial to living out the Mission of Jesus and creating Sacred Spaces.

I remember one day when my daughter was in grade school and I went to pick her up, she wanted to point out a new friend she made. At first, I couldn’t tell to whom she was specifically pointing. She began to describe him: “It’s the boy in the white shirt and blue pants.” I still couldn’t figure out who it was, so she kept giving me more details. Then finally I said, “Oh, you mean that African-American kid?” She said, “Yes, that’s the one.”

When she looked at the boy she just saw “kid”. Whereas, I, a child of the 60’s who was raised in a period where “color adjectives” were very important to differentiate people, saw color; I saw “black kid”. I cringe just thinking of that.

Let me be clear, I’m *not* saying erase all adjectives. I’m not saying they simply don’t matter, etc. Being like the Jesus is not an adventure in burying your head in the sand and ignoring really bad stuff about people. If you are in a dangerous or abusive situation, then by all means get help and get out. Hospitality does not mean you never call the cops. You can value people *and* call the cops.

But my point is this: the eyes and the heart of the Jesus allow the adjectives to create compassion, rather than establish value.

When we choose to increase the adjective, we are being like the Pharisees; we end up with reasons *not* to embrace the other. We end up with rivals and maybe even enemies where God has none. Or at the very least, we end up with an ungodly distance from others.

This is one of the reasons I stopped listening to talk radio.

It is because these guys make a living emphasizing the adjectives. And not only that, they demonize the adjectives. Liberals and conservatives aren't just different from each other, they're enemies. Don't ever let radio determine for you who your enemies are. Let God do that. When our list of enemies is longer than God's we may need to check ourselves.

My point is, where would we be, where would *I be*, if Jesus got stuck *on my adjectives*?

If we don't love like Jesus does, people will hide their shameful and unhealthy adjectives—which may be the very things that may need the change and healing touch of Jesus.

Which leads me to the next crucial element in creating Sacred Spaces: Being Curious.

For some of us, curiosity may sound a little odd to put here as something crucial to Sacred Spaces, but it can be a powerful element in forming them.

Let me give you a very personal example of what I mean. Quite a few years ago I was seeing a therapist. She asked me about my life's journey so I started with the basics. As I kept sharing I was feeling that maybe she was bored hearing about my life, so I started to skim some events and my voice got softer. She noticed what was happening and asked me why I was doing that. I told her that I thought she might be bored listening to all this. She then leaned forward and looked me straight in the eyes and said: "Steve, your life fascinates me."

How many times in your life have you ever been told that sincerely? That kind of genuine

interest immediately made her safe and so my trust for her went way up. And as a result I could share more openly and deeply about my life and my journey toward growth and healing moved forward. That "your life fascinates" mentality will go a long way in opening people up and having them feel loved.

One researcher pointed out that children ask 125 probing questions each day...adults only six!!!! That means somewhere between childhood and adulthood we lose 119 curious questions per day. Think of the tragic relational loss there is when we lose our curiosity of others.

And by curious I don't mean nosy. Nosiness is like voyeurism. It's a creepy peering into another person's life. Nosiness never creates Sacred Spaces.

My point is, when we are curious it invites *openness* in others. And when that happens, things like healing and encouragement and growth and change and the possibility of relationships are far more likely to take shape.

If there is one thing I have learned over three decades of ministering to people is this hard truth: What stays hidden—stays hurting. And we Christians are in the healing business. If we are going to get to the hurt so it can be healed, we need to walk in there with godly curiosity and hospitality.

Again, listen to Christian writer Larry Crabb: "A central task of community is to create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down, safe enough for each of us to own and reveal our brokenness...Only then can

community be used of God to restore our souls...Without a safe community we will not own our brokenness. The determination to trust no one and the deep belief that no one really has your best interest at heart—is undermined and destroyed only in an environment of trust, safety, and feeling loved."

My big point is that curiosity makes us listeners. And *no one* can experience real love outside of this experience of being heard. As Christian professor David Augsburger put it: "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."

When your curiosity gives the safety, the permission, and the assurance that a soul can speak freely; that a dream can be shared openly; that a hidden fear can be revealed confidently; or that a deep pain will be taken seriously—we create real Sacred Spaces that enable real relationship, soul healing, and the Holy Spirit to do some profound work.

When you are in a small group, or a Bible study, or you're having lunch and someone says to you: "You know, I've never shared this before but..." you are in a Sacred moment. And it is incumbent upon us as Christians to meet such a statement with all the curiosity and reverent listening that we can muster.

And let me make it clear, Sacred Spaces are *not* only created in counselor's or pastor's offices. They can happen anywhere.

During seminary I worked as a lowly mail boy in a big corporation near our campus.

**A**s I delivered mail and supplies I would check in with how people were doing. For example, I would say things like, "You seem a little stressed today; you okay?" or "You look pretty happy; what's going on?"

In time people started to open up to me about their struggles as a parent, their struggles with office conflict, struggles with marriage, or sharing their big dreams for their lives, etc.

They shared with me so much that I had to ask my boss if I could use one of the smaller conference rooms during lunch in order to just to let people share what was on their heart. I didn't know anything about counseling in those days. I was just curious. But because so many people are so chronically lonely, they opened up.

You see it's not the place where we are in or the positions we hold which create Sacred Spaces. It's the people *we choose to be* as we are with others that create the Sacred Space.

The bottom line is this: when you create spaces which give the safety, the permission and the assurance that a soul can speak freely; that a dream can be shared openly; that a hidden fear can be revealed confidently, or that a deep pain will be taken seriously—you create a Sacred Space.

When you turn your full attention to your kids or spouse after a long hard day at work because they need to share their thoughts, feelings or activities; or when you see someone new at church and you say, "Hey, can I buy you lunch?" or "Do you have time for a cappuccino?" Or "So, tell me about yourself." Or when you look beyond Adjectives and love the Noun, you create a Sacred Space and live into the command of Jesus to love one another as He loved us. And you give testimony to another way to live than this world offers.

You don't need a theological or psychological degree to do this. You just need to step up and be curious and be hospitable.

And when we do, we get to see a little more of what Jesus intended when He came at Christmas.

Benediction:

May your hands extend God's touch.

May your arms extend God's care.

May your eyes see nouns instead of adjectives.

May your words speak His wisdom.

And may your ears listen curiously to the soul of others.

For the sake of our King and Healer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*