

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
August 1, 2010

Connections: Friends
Psalm 119:1-3, 9-16; John 14:15-17; 15:12-17

Since I was on study leave this past week I planned this service two weeks ago and created a sermon series. The overall theme is connections. Last week's sermon spoke about meaningful connections from a role-model perspective – leaders, sports stars, parents, grandparents and teachers. Today's sermon is about friends.

Journalist Harry Stein in an essay entitled, "Just Good Friends" says that although a great deal has been said and written on the subject, it seems that the currency of friendship is in flux. People brush up against one another, on the job or at leisure, and bang! They identify one another as friends. What they mean, of course, is acquaintances.

He writes that people from their early twenties to their late sixties have no genuine friends and do not know it. They socialize regularly, they know people, and it seems to them that this is what it is all about. "In my mind's eye," says Stein, "The Pack – Sinatra, Marin, Lawford, Davis Jr., Bishop – always epitomized this syndrome." He says he could be wrong, of course, but imagines them sitting around and drinking and topping one another's jokes, and then going off and not thinking about one another for six months."

Stein laments the lost art of friendship. I think Stein's analysis is a downer. We all have friends and friendships have myriad gradations. I'm not sure what that mythical perfect friend is. You are my friends just like we are friends of each other. That's the beauty of the church.

Tim is my best friend from high school. He has become hugely successful in business and I became a pastor (something we never imagined at the time) and we still hang out like we did in high school. When I am in Durban, South Africa, I stay with him and his wife Midge. I was the best man at their wedding. If he was in California for my wedding he would have been my best man. We are close friends but I'm not sure how close.

Kevin in England is my best friend from college. The discussions we enjoyed back then are still enjoyed today. Our friendship has grown over the years but I'm not quite sure how it has grown.

I met Steve in Jacksonville, Florida, 25 years ago. He now lives in Denver. His family is close to our family. Steve and I regularly touch base on the phone. We are Christians – Presbyterian Christians – but are worlds apart politically. We are close friends. I'm not sure how we match up with Stein's definition of friendship but I know we are way beyond the acquaintance stage.

Lillian Rubin in her book, *Just Friends: the Role of Friendships in Our Lives*, writes of a woman who was relegated to the middle row of the church in her best friend's wedding.

She wondered why she was not in the front row with her friend's parents because she knew she was a closer friend to her friend than her parents were. She knew more about her friend than her parents knew.

When it comes to defining who and what a friend is I throw up my hands and thank God that scripture gives us a glimpse of what a friend can look like. It is found in today's gospel text.

Jesus calls his disciples friends. One might say that this is his most important relational category that Jesus has with his disciples. For sure, we worship him as God incarnate and Lord of the universe but that's when we see him in his Godhead. We worship God. As a human being, Jesus as fully human, we are encouraged by Jesus to call him friend. There begins our understanding of friendship.

The bottom-line is outlined by Jesus: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Friendship is love for one another but not simple love it is love in the way Jesus loves us. It is *philia* (sisterly and brotherly love) and *agape* (God's love). Friendship is relational in all the ways it can be with its center in Jesus' commandment to love. Friendship is spiritual.

Friends face the overt spiritual needs in one another. How often do we share with a friend her or his spiritual journey? For friendships to grow we can share with each other how God is present in our lives, how our faith informs our ethics in business and home, how we deal with ultimate questions, and how we act out our faith. We tell our faith stories.

Some of our friends are not overtly Christian or spiritual. We discuss spiritual matters anyway. As friends they respect our opinions and perspectives. And we listen to theirs!

One of Suellen's favorite sayings is: "Friends double our joy and divide our grief." When we receive good news we share it with friends and they make us happier. On the other hand, when someone in our life dies or when we lose something important our friends come forward in practical and caring ways to lessen our grief and hardship. These are spiritual connections.

Jesus then says: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Friendship is sacrificial. It is willing to go and bat for one's friend. Laying down one's life for one's friend is a tough order. It is something to keep in mind when the challenge comes. We will know when and how that comes. It most probably will not mean literally laying down one's life as Jesus did – although it could mean that. It may mean sacrificing one's ego, reputation, whatever we're holding on to, for our friend.

Jesus continues: "You are my friends if you do what I command you." I heard this week that when Jesus encourages us to do what he commands he is encouraging us to follow his teaching. It's an unpacking of love. We meditated on the Beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, etc. When we do these things in relation to our friends our friendship grows deeper.

Friendships as reflected in Christ are interactive, varied and deep. He encourages at the end of the text to bear fruit. Think of the fruit of the Spirit in relation to your friendships: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, generosity and self-control.

God is not aloof or distant. God is not cold and lifeless. God walked this earth in the person of Jesus who called us friend. Jesus left his legacy of friendship, inspired by the Spirit, for us to love as he loved us. Jesus calls us to be friends one with the other. He calls us to meaningful connections. Amen.