

John 13: 2-24

The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

Jesus and the Beloved Disciple

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The subject this morning is friendship, and we're going to think about friendship as we recall Jesus in his relationship with the beloved disciple. What is a friend? George Eliot had an idea about that. She said, "A friend is one around whom there is the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe." Walker Percy said, "A friend is someone who knows the worst in us, and they don't turn their faces away." Or, another way to say it, "A real friend is one who, when you make a fool of yourself, they don't think it's a permanent job." And I really don't know if it was Garrison Keillor or Barney Fife who said, "You find out who your real friends are when you've got a problem with your septic tank."

What is a friend? What is a true friend? A friend will do two things for you, at least. The first is obvious. I don't think the second necessarily is, but a friend will hold us close. It begins with an embrace. When we're troubled, a friend will be there for us. When there's ecstasy, a friend will be there to share it. A friend will hold us close. Jesus was that kind of person, just ask the man who couldn't walk, by the pool at Bethesda. Or the woman who came to the well - she was a Samaritan, he was a Jew. He wanted a drink. Water of the spirit, he gave her. He was a friend to the outcast. He was a friend to tax collectors, and he had a friend, a beloved disciple, when he needed a friend, he had a friend. Jesus said, "I'm troubled in spirit." It's important that he said it. "I need some help." He who was the truth and the light, the bread of life, the light to the world, said, "I'm troubled in spirit." Was he troubled because he knew he would be betrayed? Perhaps. Was he troubled because he knew the end was near? Maybe. Was he troubled because he thought God had forsaken him? We know, eventually, he did think that. We don't know why he was troubled, but we are told when he said "One of you will betray me," the other disciples looked at one another. But one disciple, the beloved disciple, the friend, that Jesus got close to him, he got close to Jesus, the other disciples were arguing among themselves, "Is it I?" The one beloved disciple was close to him. Friends will be there for us.

Another tragedy in a Colorado school, in our nation. Another gunman deranged. Why? Deer Creek Middle School. Why did he do it? Opening fire on students. Teacher David Benke came and tackled him, ran right into the man with a gun. He fired the gun at him, and he tackled him. And the man fired, Benke tackled him. And then Becky Miller came and she knocked the gun away. One of the students who had been shot, one of the two students who'd been shot, was crying, "Am I going to die?" and Becky said, "Not on my watch." And David Benke said, "I'm not a hero. What I did took an instant to decide, and three minutes effort. The rest of them, they're heroes." Well if Becky and David, if they're not heroes, they're friends. When there was distress, they got close. Jesus, troubled in spirit, one of his disciples got close.

Do any of you remember when Kent Millard came here to the church several years ago, pastor of a church, big church in Indianapolis, came here to talk to us about the passion-driven church. Passion driven congregation. He spoke to us about how to make the church permission-giving, and how we put our organizational structures of the church in a position to help encourage and support the dreams of the members of the church. And we listened to him, and we turned our church into a permission-giving congregation. Not dictated by a few. Not narrowed into one narrow perspective, but varieties of perspective. We took the "No Trespassing" signs down out of the parking lot, because they were unfriendly. How can you welcome people to your church, when you got "No Trespassing" outside in your parking lot? We opened up our hearts, and began to say to ourselves, money should not determine what we do or what we don't do. If God wants it done, we'll get it done. The money will come. And it did. And it does.

Last year we were the fastest-growing church in three states, for Methodists. This year, our worship attendance growth is on a list of churches growing. We're a growing church. Kent Millard got to us. He spoke to us three years ago, and we listened to him. You may

remember that night, if you were here, because a couple of things happened, some of them kind of odd. One of the things that happened, it was very strange, was in the middle of his lecture, the fire alarm went off and we had to evacuate. The other thing you may remember is, that night he brought his good friend Don Messer. I introduced Don to the congregation. Don and Kent are very good friends. Don is the director of the program to defeat global AIDS. Don and Kent are friends, and that goes way back, as to why they're friends. Kent's wife Minietta was to have surgery, and Kent tells the story. "I prayed with her before she went into surgery, and then I went to the hospital room, to wait for the doctor to come, to tell me the outcome of the operation. I remember sitting there alone, and fearful thoughts crept into my mind, and I remember thinking, "What if they find cancer?" I remember thinking, "What if her heart acts up, and she dies?" I remember thinking, "What if the surgeons make a terrible mistake?" I'm sitting there, trying to put those thoughts out of my mind, when Don walked in. He had cancelled meetings back in Denver, had flown to Boston. He was a seminary president, Iliff School of Theology, but he flew to Boston to sit with me during her surgery, and he will never know how much that has meant to me." Kent Millard was a troubled soul. Minietta did turn out to be fine, the surgery was good. But his friend drew close to him. Like Jesus was troubled in spirit. I hope we all have a friend who will be there for us when we're troubled in spirit.

I have a good friend named Gilbert. He and I were co-pastors in a church in Boulder. He called me last week. Gilbert likes to hunt. He likes to hunt, and when we were together at First Church in Boulder, he would go out hunting for wild creatures, and the secretaries at the church would pray for the animals. And their prayers were usually pretty effective. He told me they'd been hunting for antelope here recently, that he and his son Mike drove a truck to a place where they could hunt, and they were looking for antelope. And they saw some antelope, but the antelope just laughed at them and ran away. Didn't get any antelope. Then they just kind of got disgusted and got back in Michael's truck, and they were driving out, and an antelope came out of nowhere and hit the truck. Caused \$4,000 damage to the truck. Can you imagine, the antelope's off to the side, saying, "You wouldn't believe what I did to one of those hunters." We laughed about that, and then Gilbert sent me a poem I got this week. He wrote a poem after we had talked. He said, "Each new day, an awakening holds its surprises and bumps and fulfillments. Each monumental experience holds its own challenges of faith and reliance and expectations." And then he wrote, "It is good to have friends who support and share our journey." Oh, it is. It is good to be a friend. It is good for there to be a friend, to hold us close. If we have friends like that, or if we are a friend like that, we're so lucky. We're so lucky.

Earl Willard knew of two men, Jim and Philip. They were in high school together. They were in college together, best friends, you know. And then they joined the Marines, and they were sent to Vietnam, and they were in the same unit, same platoon together. It was one of the worst battles in the war. Fierce. Heavy artillery bombing. Command came to retreat. They did. Jim noticed that Philip wasn't with the others. He begged the commanding officer that he could go back and get him. The order was given, no. No going back. That would be suicide. Well, Jim disobeyed the order. He ran into battle. He called out for Philip. Some time later, his platoon saw him carrying the limp body back in his arms. Jim's commanding officer was irate, yelling at him. "I told you not to go back. I

told you it was suicide. Your friend is dead. There was nothing you could do." "Sir," Jim said, "you're wrong. I got there in time, before he died. He looked at me. His last words - "I knew you would come. I knew you would come." A friend will be there for us. A friend will hold us close when we need help. Friendship begins with an embrace, but that's obvious. That's obvious. There's a second thing a true friend will do. A true friend. It leads to release. It leads to release. Some friendships become a little sick. Some friendships become co-dependent. A friend, it's not a leash, it's a link. A true friend knows not to smother, but to point to another, and another. A true friend doesn't just hold us close. A true friend will help turn us loose.

Robert Emmons in an article titled "Pay it Forward" says, "We often like to think of ourselves and our lives that we are creators, and that our lives are ours to do with as we please. He then recalls a scene from "The Simpsons." I bet you've not had quotes from "The Simpsons" in a sermon on a Sunday morning. But when asked to say grace at the family dinner table, Bart Simpson offers the following words: "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves. Thanks for nothing." Emmons goes on to say, "Bart Simpson is missing the bigger picture. Grateful people sense that much goodness happens independent of our actions, and maybe even in spite of them. Gratitude implies humility and recognition that we could not be who we are, or could not be where we are, without the contribution of others.

Wayne Dyer goes on to say, "You know, the word "ego", e-g-o, has the capacity to signify "edged out God"? Thank you God for nothing? It's all about me, and my friends are mine? See, friendship isn't all about me, it's about the friend. True friends will not try to hold onto us, but will work to set us free. A true friend will not try to smother, but will try to help us turn to another, and another. There is good evidence to support that the Scriptures are very unclear who the Beloved Disciple is. I don't think we know. Most people think it's John Mark. Dan Brown thinks it's Mary Magdalene. Some think it's Lazarus, and you could make a case for that, because there's only one time that I'm aware of in the New Testament narrative, where Jesus actually cries. It's when his friend Lazarus dies. It's a mystery, who the Beloved Disciple is, and in that mystery, I think there's a message, that we do not know for sure. Look what he did the night he was troubled in spirit. He took a towel, he washed the disciples' feet, and then he gave them the commandment. It's called the mandate. I give you a commandment, a mandate, it's the word we use when we celebrate that event in Holy Week on Thursday, mandate Thursday, Maundy Thursday, he gave them a commandment after he washed them. "Do as I have done. Be as I have been. Be to others the Christ." True friendship, it's not when we tie something down under our influence to the point of control. True friendship is when we link someone up with others to the point of community. True friends do not smother, they leave friends to another.

Vince Eisner has a friend. Vince Eisner's friend is Fred Rogers. Vince asked Mr. Rogers if they could go to lunch one day, and Fred said to him, "Well, yeah, let's go to lunch. But would you mind if someone joins us? I think you'll like Jack." "So we drove downtown and we walked a couple of blocks, and instead of turning into a restaurant, he led me into the lobby of an old YMCA, into a musty elevator, finally up to the seventh floor, and we

walked down a dark, seedy hallway to a brown-painted door. It was a flophouse in downtown Pittsburgh, and the door opened, and to my astonishment, there stood a muscled, bearded, long-haired, rough-necked man in a black t-shirt with jeans and a gaze that made me feel that perhaps we had knocked on the wrong door. I learned that Jack had come from an abused childhood, that he had made some bad decisions, and that Fred Rogers and he met in prison. Fred had taken an interest in Jack, and was helping him get back on his feet. And Jack in turn was teaching Fred a thing or two about the dark side of life. Witnessing such an unlikely exchange between two vastly different yet obviously trusted friends, Fred and Jack taught me a vital lesson that day. I learned the human heart is a vast and holy space, and that it takes great courage to stand at the door and knock, and it takes great courage to open it." Vince Eisner will never forget his friend Fred Rogers. He will never forget this man and his neighborhood and how children's television was far more about children than television, and the neighborhood was an initiation into the concept that our relationships can be tied to other relationships, that it's all basically about being part of a community, and one with one another.

Eugene Peterson said it. "The streets of our cities and the pews of our churches are crowded these days with emaciated men and plastic women." And Blackmere called it, he said "There are too many limp souls." So many of us need help and community. We want to keep company with people who expand and deepen our capacity to love our true lives. We want to be awakened into friendship and other friendships and expanding our friendships, enlivened by a spiritual and animated belief that good can come out of bad, whatever the bad is. That love can be unconditional, that God didn't make us perfect, and God doesn't demand perfection, but God waits for us in our imperfect state, to join us with kindred souls and the task of people-making. Friendship. A friend will hold us close and a friend will set us free. Friendship is never about dependency, it's about freedom. True friendship leads to release.

I end today with a story that doesn't entirely fit, but that's never stopped me from telling a story in a sermon. I did last week, I often do. South Africa, Nelson Mandela, "Invictus," the book, the movie, take your pick. Nelson Mandela, twenty-seven years in prison, becomes the president of his country. He shocked the world by asking his jailer to stand up there, join him on the platform when he was sworn in as president. He set up a truth and reconciliation commission with Desmond Tutu as its chair. Its primary purpose was to look into those racial crimes committed by police and army, and if the charges were presented, and if the defendant confessed, there would be no punishment. This is Philip Yancey's story, but I repeat it. South Africa, a policeman whose name was Vanderbrook, confessed to a horrendous crime. He and some other officers had shot an 18-year-old boy and burned the boy's body to destroy the evidence. Eight years later, Vanderbrook returned to the same house and took the boy's father. His wife watched. They killed him. They burned his body. It was brutal. There was a trial. The truth and reconciliation commission met. The evidence was presented. Vanderbrook confessed and then this happened. The courtroom got very quiet. An elderly woman who had lost first her son and then her husband was invited to speak. "What do you want from Mr. Vanderbrook?" the judge said. She said, "I want him to go to the place where they burned my husband's body and gather up the dust so I can give him a decent funeral. Mr. Vanderbrook, you

took all my family from me, and I still have a lot of love to give." And then she addressed the judge again. "Twice a month, I would like for him to come to my ghetto and spend a day with me, so I can mother him. I would like Mr. Vanderbrook to know he is forgiven by God and I forgive him. I would like to embrace him so that he knows my forgiveness is real." It started with Mandela. It was translated by Desmond Tutu, and an old woman picked it up and Vanderbrook began to see the world in a way he never had before.

Friendship, true friendship, it begins with an embrace, and it leads to release. It is true. And we are, all of us, the beloved disciples of Christ.