

10.15.23 Ending the Famine of Friendship Ecclesiastes 4.9-12
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We can't respond every week to the latest disaster, tragedy or act of violence that takes place in our nation or the world, but some of them rise to a level that must be acknowledged. I appreciated Steve Carter, our worship participant today, reaching out to me earlier in the week regarding the meaningful prayer he offered which sought to intercede and lament the terrible terrorist attack by Hamas that took place in Israel and killed more than 900 people. Israel has the right to live in peace as do the Palestinian people. What happened in Israel last Saturday and continues to this moment is inhumane. The situation in Israel and Gaza has deep, tangled, and complex historical roots which include the untenable position taken by Hamas regarding Israel's right to exist as well as the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinian people. However, indiscriminate acts of violence against civilians and noncombatants are unjustifiable. Killing any people's children and grandparents is not a way to resolve differences or to seek solutions to complex problems.

Jacob Argamani's daughter Noa was abducted by Hamas in Saturday's attacks. I found the father's response moving. He said. *"Let's make peace with our neighbors in any way possible. I want my daughter back. Enough with these wars. The other side also has captives, the other side also has mothers that are weeping. We are two people with one father. Because of these things, let's make real peace,"*

Writer Kelsey Piper observed, *"It takes extraordinary strength and courage to keep the humanity of your enemies in mind when your daughter has been kidnapped. One of the secondary tragedies of a terrorist attack is how quickly the desire for safety, assurance, and revenge beats back the fragile progress we've made toward a world where we care about everyone, regardless of their national origin or the decisions made by their government. Sometimes the best way to live in a world where children die pointlessly is not to doom scroll, but to grieve and give and to do whatever's in your power to change things."* Part of how change comes is by enlarging our circle of relationship and getting to know someone who is different than we are and coming to see they're human and they have fears, dreams, hopes, and desires as all people do.

Suffering is a universal human experience, grief is a universal human experience, and in both situations friends can make a big difference. In **Job 2:11-13**, as soon as Job's three friends heard about his troubles, they all set out from their homes, and they met up together and went to comfort and console their friend. They wept with him, tore their robes, threw dust on their heads, and sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights *"and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."* How do you think Job felt about his friends during those days? Do you think he felt supported and connected to them as they steadfastly stayed with him in his grief? It reminds me of the scene in the movie Forrest Gump where Forrest just sits down in the dirt next to Jennie and says to the audience, not to her, *"Sometimes there just aren't enough rocks."*

Jill and I feel blessed to have so many people we truly consider friends. In the aftermath of my dad's death the outpouring of support and love we've felt has been incredible. We can't thank you all enough for what you've done for us in the last few weeks including all our volunteers and staff who helped with the service and the reception yesterday; as well as everyone who made a dessert, sent a card, email, or text, or who brought something to our home. I feel for people who don't have friends and a community of support, and sadly, there are millions of people who increasingly don't. If I were to ask you how many "close friends" you have (not including relatives), how many would you say you have? For most Americans, the answer is pretty sad and it's only getting worse. Over the last 30 years the number of close friends people report having has dropped significantly which is leading to a corresponding increase in loneliness and unhappiness. Having quality friendships is an antidote to loneliness.

In May, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General declared a new public health epidemic in America, it wasn't the Coronavirus, it wasn't fentanyl, it wasn't gun violence, he said the biggest public health crisis we face is **loneliness**. Loneliness lies behind the opioid epidemic and so many other problems and can have profound effects on mental health as well as heart disease, stroke, and dementia. A decline in friendships and social connections is linked to billions of dollars in health care costs. The Surgeon General's report stated social isolation increases the risk of premature mortality **by nearly 30 percent. This has been building for decades.** We've seen a

decrease in participation in community organizations, in faith organizations and recreational leagues over several decades. **By being a member of this church and playing in a baseball league I'm decreasing my risk of premature death! :)**

Rob Reiner's 1986 movie, *Stand By Me* is set in Castle Rock, Oregon, over Labor Day weekend in 1959. Four boys, Gordie, Chris, Teddy, and Vern set out on an adventure. At the end of the film, Richard Dreyfuss, who plays the writer narrating the film, types on his computer, *"I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve...does anyone?"* Whenever I see that movie I'm thankful for the deep friendships that began in my childhood and continue so many years later. At my dad's funeral yesterday, four of my school friends whom I've known since I was twelve came to the service, one all the way from Miami, Florida, as well as two other childhood friends from Maine and New York. I'm also thankful for the friends I've met since I turned twelve because that's a long time ago and thankfully a lot of friends ago! It's hard to calculate **the value of a friend**. *"Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure."*¹

The book of Ecclesiastes has something to say about **the value of a friend** in the midst of the challenges and struggles of life. **Ecclesiastes 4.9-12**, *"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. 11 Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? 12 And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken."*

Friendship is a relationship of mutual trust and congeniality. Many biblical writers realized that friendship enriches human life. Abraham is called the friend of God (Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23) and Exodus 33:11 says, *"the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend."* The Book of Proverbs talks about the benefits and requirements of friendship. **Loyalty and steadfastness** are marks of a true friend. **Proverbs 17:17** declares, **"A friend loves at all times."** Poverty or adversity often reveal people who are friends in name only (Proverbs 19:4, 6-7). In our time you may hear about "deal friends" and "real friends." An irony of the book of Job is that Job's

¹ Sirach 6:14, The Apocrypha, (NRSV).

three friends, once they break their silence and solidarity with him in their attempts to get him to repent, intensify rather than relieve his suffering. Because they're more loyal to the certainty of their own beliefs than they are to Job, they're unable to offer the genuine sympathy that marks real friendship.

In the New Testament, Jesus' effort to mirror God's love and mercy even to those looked down upon by the self-righteous and smug, causes his opponents to call him, '*a friend of tax collectors and sinners*' (Luke 7:34). Jesus says his disciples are his friends **if they do what he commands**; he calls them friends because he revealed to them what he heard from his Father (John 15:14-15). To be Jesus' friend is to love one another (cf. 15:12-14).

We all need friends *like* Jesus. What a blessing it would be if we could all *be* friends like Jesus. In his book, *Sacred Companions*, David Benner, **lists five elements in healthy friendships: love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality (offering reciprocal care) and accompaniment (taking an active interest in each other's journey).** Steve Macchia adds a sixth, **the willingness and desire to listen.** If you think about Jesus, he offered all six of these elements to his disciples as his friends. He loved them, he was honest with them, he let them into his circle of confidence and trust, they cared for each other, they journeyed together, and Jesus listened to and answered their questions and hopes, no matter how appropriate or awkward. People who are truly our friends and to whom we are friends – share these six elements with each other.

Leslie Weatherhead defined Christianity this way: "*Christianity is the acceptance of the gift of the friendship of Jesus.*"² **Jesus is our friend** - he stands by us, supports, and comforts us, but like all true friendships, it needs to go both ways. Jesus also wants us to love him and others the way he loves us. Jesus wants us to experience the friendship, love, and joy that make life a blessing and he wants us to share that transforming friendship with other people who also need to experience the love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality, and interest in each other's journey and the willingness and desire to listen that mark true friendships.

In all friendships we not only care about the other person, but we also take seriously what our friend takes seriously, which for Christians are the commandments of

² Leslie Weatherhead, *The Transforming Friendship*, (Abingdon, Nashville, 1990), 18.

Jesus. If we have the desire to be known as, identified as, or called a friend of Jesus, then we need to take seriously the commands Jesus gave us. We will do what he says. Otherwise, we may be deluding ourselves about the depth or nature of our friendship with Jesus. Those who are friends of Jesus obey his commandments, especially that we love one another. We often become like the friends we make and admire. We become like those we spend time with, which is why parents are concerned about their children's friends. When we're friends of Jesus, spending time with him and seeking to obey his commandments, then the love that was in Jesus even for outcasts and the downtrodden will also be evident in our lives. We will not be Christians for whom our relationship with Jesus makes no apparent difference in our lives.

I like the story about the cab driver who reached the gates of heaven and announced his presence to St. Peter, who looked him up in his Big Book. Upon reading the entry for the cabby, St. Peter invites him to grab a silk robe and a golden staff and to proceed into heaven. A Baptist preacher was next in line behind the cab driver, and he was watching with interest what happened. The preacher eagerly announced himself to St. Peter.

Upon scanning the preacher's entry in the Big Book, St. Peter furrowed his brow and said, *"Okay, we'll let you in, but take that cloth robe and wooden staff."* The preacher was surprised and disappointed and said, *"But I'm a preacher. You gave that cab driver a gold staff and a silk robe. Surely I rate higher than a cabby."* St. Peter responded matter-of-factly, *"Here we're interested in results. When you preached, people slept. When the cab driver drove his taxi, people prayed."* The result God's interested in is friends of Jesus who do what Jesus commands.

Robert Louis Stevenson said, "A friend is a present you give yourself." The way to have a friend is to be one. The key is to remember there are steps that you can take in your own life today that will make a difference, just spending 15 minutes a day with people you care about, making sure that you're fully present when you're interacting with others, and you're not distracted by technology, looking for ways to help other people, neighbors and co-workers, recognizing that small acts of service can be powerful in making us feel more connected with one another. These are the small steps that can make a big difference in how connected we feel.

The friendship of other people and the friendship of Jesus our Savior, Lord, and Teacher nurtures, feeds, and sustains our life.

In Acts 4 Peter and John are hauled before the council of all the rulers and elders and teachers of religious law in Jerusalem after they've created quite a stir by healing a lame man in the name of Jesus. Verse 13 says (*New Living Translation*), "*The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that **they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.***"

One of the goals of a Christian is for people to recognize we've been with Jesus. What a great way to be known - as someone who has been with Jesus.

If that process isn't happening and evident in someone, it's more than fair to question whether a person truly knows Jesus because we can't know and spend time with Jesus without being changed. Thank God for Jesus and for the friends who have touched our lives so deeply; who have laughed, listened, and cried and journeyed with us through life. It's hard to estimate the value of a friend who loves at all times. "*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other...though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.*"

Blessing: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers, and sisters. Amen. Galatians 6:18

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Think about friends from different eras of your life: childhood, high school, college or the service, work, or during retirement. Share or reflect about one friend who touched your life in a significant way; what made her or him so special?
2. What does Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 tell us about the value of a friend?
3. Friendship is a relationship of mutual trust and congeniality. Why is trust so important in friendships?

4. In his book, *Sacred Companions*, David Benner identifies five elements of healthy friendships: love, honesty, intimacy, mutuality (offering reciprocal care) and accompaniment (taking an active interest in each other's journey). Discuss or reflect on why each of those elements is important and what they contribute to a friendship. Is there anything you would add to his list?
5. Steve Macchia of Leadership Transformations, adds a sixth element of friendship: the willingness and desire to listen. How would you describe the role of listening in a healthy friendship?
6. Leslie Weatherhead wrote, "*Christianity is the acceptance of the gift of the friendship of Jesus.*" What does Jesus say about being his friend in The Gospel of John 15:12-15 and what does that mean for you?
7. What steps can you take to grow in your friendship with Jesus and to be a friend to others?