

SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIPS

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. KEN SHIGEMATSU. 2013 OCTOBER 13.

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12



Thanks, Ryan and Amanda, for leading us tonight and for the reminder that we really do need God.

I don't know if you saw the edition of *National Geographic* which featured, as a cover story, people who are living to 100 and beyond and flourishing. National Geographic researchers looked at three communities in the world that had the highest percentage of people living to age 100 and beyond – centenarians. These communities were located in Sardinia, Italy (or a part of Sardinia); Loma Linda, Southern California, which may surprise you, but in Loma Linda there is an unusually high percentage of Seventh-day Adventist Christians who regularly keep a 24-hour Sabbath, which helps to foster their overall health; and Okinawa, Japan.

The National Geographic researchers discovered that there were some commonalities between these three communities of centenarians. One of the commonalities, which may not surprise you, is the fact that they all embraced a healthy diet – not a fad diet but a generally healthy diet. All three of these centenarian communities also had a purpose for their lives – a reason to get up in the morning beyond just trying to set some kind of world record for living into a certain age. All of these people of 100-plus years of age had a community – a group of friends – that they journeyed through life with. And then this surprised me, but the National Geographic researchers pointed out that each of these centenarian communities were connected to a faith community; the researcher said that it seems that if a person is connected to a faith community and participate at least four times a month in that community, that will likely add between four and fourteen years to their life.

We know that friendships and community have a powerful impact on our physical wellbeing and our emotional wellbeing, but community also powerfully impacts our *spiritual* wellbeing.

Dr. Susan Philips, who led our first Life Together seminar this past week on spiritual friendship, makes the observation that friendships aren't very important to us in our society. She points out that if you were given a great job opportunity and were required to move out of Vancouver to take that job, but then you were to say, "Well, I've got a couple of good friendships here in Vancouver, so I'm going to decline this," people would be baffled by that kind of response. In our culture, it is socially acceptable to move across the continent for a great job or to go to university or to pursue a romantic relationship with someone that you've met online, but if you move across the continent just to be with one or two friends, people are just puzzled by that. We don't really value friendships very much as a society, but as I just said, friendships are crucial for our physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

I was recently at Wheaton College, which is a Christian school in the Chicago area, and in chapel, I was saying to the student body that the number one predictor as to whether you will continue in your faith after you get out of school is whether you have friends who share a common faith. For us here tonight, one of the number one factors in whether we will continue in our faith and in our life with Jesus is if we have friends who share a common love for God.

Last Sunday, my colleagues Ken Pierce, who is here tonight, and Ryan Lui talked about how small groups can make a powerful difference in our life with God. And tonight, I want us to look at how spiritual friendships can enable our life with God to flourish.

If you have your Bibles— I know it's a little dark out there, but you're welcome, if you want, to turn to John 15; the text will come up on the screen in just a moment.

Here, in John 15, Jesus has gathered with some of his closest students on the night before he goes to the cross. He is sharing a meal with them in an upper room in Jerusalem, and on this very important night, he says these words to his students:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

(John 15:9-17[†])

Let's pray together.

Living God,

We thank you that you became a human being in Jesus Christ.

And on this night, when you were in the upper room with your students, you called them – and you called *us* – “friends.” You paid us the greatest honour in describing us as your friends.

Teach us what it means to enjoy and to be changed by your friendship and to offer your friendship to others, having once tasted what it means to be in relationship with you.

It's in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

In this text, we see that Jesus calls those of us who follow him “friends.” No rabbi in his day would have done that. It is an extraordinarily intimate term. It is a term that really honours us.

But Jesus not only calls us his friends, he calls us also to befriend each other by saying, in verse 12, “**Love each other as I have loved you.**”

We're in this series on what it looks like to experience God in every part of our lives, and in *God in My Everything* there is this diagram in the shape of a trellis. The trellis, if you're new to Tenth, is simply a support structure that enables us to flourish in our friendship with God; it is a series of spiritual practices that we can employ to connect us more deeply with God. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about how meditating on Scripture can support our friendship with God. Three weeks ago, we talked about how our rhythm of prayer can make us conscious of a God who is with us all the time. Tonight, we're going to look at spiritual friendship and how that draws us closer to God.

Now, for sure, prayer and Scripture reading are very important in our friendship with God, but for some people,

[†] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®.

spiritual friendship is just as important. For some seasons of life, spiritual friendship is *even more* helpful than prayer and Scripture reading.

And so tonight, we're going to look at spiritual friendship. In particular, we're going to look at how Jesus Christ embodies what it means to be an ideal spiritual friend as he commits to us, as he cares for us and as he is completely candid with us.

What does a spiritual friend look like? A spiritual friend commits, cares and is candid.

First: A spiritual friend commits.

We read in verse 13 of John 15, "**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.**" Jesus not only talked about laying down his life for us in a theoretical kind of way, but he actually laid down his life for us, on the cross, as a perfect, sinless human being. Jesus offered himself for us on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins so that we could be forgiven – so that we could have a fresh start with God. If that's not a reason to give thanks, what is? That's just amazing!

I don't know if you heard the story told by Anne Lamott. Anne is a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. She talks about this kid who is five years old at the Stanford University hospital who is approached by a doctor and told, "You know, your sister is very ill. She may be dying. And your sister is in great need of a blood transfusion and we can't seem to find blood that would match her need. You have exactly the kind of blood and the antibodies in your blood that she needs." (I'm sure that he said it more simply than that.) So, the doctor asked this five-year-old kid, "Would you be willing to share your blood and give your blood to your sister so that your sister can live?" The five-year-old boy thought about it for a long time; he was just silent and pensive. Finally, he said, "Yes. Yes, I'm... I'm willing." And so they put him on a gurney, they take some of his blood, they give it to his sister. After he's given the blood, the five-year-old is lying on this gurney, and he seems really subdued and sad. When the doctor comes back in the room, the five-year-old looks at the doctor and says, "Will I start to die right away?" He thought that, in giving blood for his sister, he was going to die. As we know, donating blood doesn't mean we're going to die, but he thought that's what it meant. His willingness to give his life for his sister really showed that he was committed to his sister.

Most of us are not in relationships where the people around us are *that* committed to us or as committed as Jesus has been. As Dr. Susan Philips points out, most of our relationships – particularly in a world where social media is becoming more and more popular – are governed by an implicit cost-benefit analysis. We enter into friendships, especially through social media, where we determine whether someone will benefit us in some way. We get a so-called Facebook friend or friend on social media because we feel like they will network us to people that will be helpful for us, or they will entertain us or inform us in some way. Even in our face-to-face friendships, a lot of times – at least at a subconscious level – we connect with people because of what we feel they will offer us; we feel like they'll do something for us, and it may be as intangible as, "This person makes me feel good."

There's nothing necessarily wrong with these kinds of relationships, but a true spiritual friend will be there for us not just because of what we can do for them. And if we are a true spiritual friend to someone else, we'll be there for them not just because of what they can do for us.

Do you have someone in your life that you could call at two or three in the morning and ask for help?

Say you were stuck in Chilliwack. Your car has broken down. You have no relatives there. You don't have BCAA membership. Could you call someone at three in the morning? Could you call someone and feel reasonably comfortable about asking for help? If you can answer yes, then you probably have a true spiritual friend.

Do you have someone in your life that you could imagine would *die* for you if it came to that? Stakes are a little higher now. Well, the answer to that question is, “Yes.” You not only have someone who *would* die for you, you have someone in your life who *did* die for you, on a cross, 2,000 years ago – someone who is ultimately and totally committed to you.

I was talking to an eight-year-old girl whose biological parents had divorced. Her parents had met up with other partners and were getting on with their lives, and this girl, who was quite precocious and very mature, was asking me a series of indirect questions. By the end of her questions, I knew exactly what she was getting at. She was asking me, in so many words, “Am I really special to anyone in the world, now that my parents have met other people?”

If you have ever wondered whether you are really special to someone, you are – because Jesus Christ would have died for you if you were the only person on the planet; he sees you *as if you were* the only person in the world. Jesus is *that* committed to you. He says, “**Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.**” He laid down his life for you. And it says we realize how committed Jesus Christ is to us that we, in turn, can offer that kind of commitment in a friendship to someone else.

I’ve got a couple of friends named Jacob and Jeremy. Some of you may remember them because they attended Tenth Church when they lived here in Vancouver. Jacob and I have kept in pretty close contact, and he’s allowed me to share part of his story about how he met Jeremy and how they became friends. Listen to what Jacob says about his friendship with Jeremy. He says:

In the first year of university, I met Jeremy on a rugged path through campus where we both happened to stop at the same time to investigate an unusual gnarled tree. In short order, our acquaintance grew from horticultural interest to a deep friendship.

But our paths later diverged when I pursued a carefree, Bohemian lifestyle while Jeremy maintained his pursuit of Christ.

Years later, when I spun into a crisis after a friend had committed suicide, I reached out to Jeremy. I met regularly with Jeremy through the aftermath of my loss, and he simply listened, giving me space to grieve.

After some time, Jeremy invited me to climb a perilous precipice near campus. On the narrow platform at the top, Jeremy offered me a lifetime of friendship, saying, “If you ever need a place to stay, you can stay with me. If you ever need money, you have my bank account. If you ever need time, my time is yours.”

I was stunned. In truth, I felt so unworthy of this level of friendship that I initially declined this gift. Later, I rescinded and accepted this offer.

Reflecting later on 20 years of brotherhood that still includes regular times of meeting, I look back on that commitment as the first tangible sign of unconditional love that I had experienced in many years. It was a beam of light breaking into the despair of my loss – and it ultimately led me to pursue the source of that light and love in God.

Jeremy, knowing how committed God was to him, how committed Jesus was to him, was able to reflect that commitment back to Jacob and say, “Hey, if you ever need a place to stay, my place is yours. If you ever need money, my bank account is yours. If you ever need time, my time is yours.” And as Jacob came to know Jesus as well, Jacob recognized how committed Jesus was to him and was able to offer that kind of commitment reciprocally back to Jeremy.

A true spiritual friend experiences the commitment of Jesus Christ and then offers that to someone else. A true friend commits.

A true friend also cares, and in Jesus' life, we see many examples of how much he cared.

One that comes to mind is when his close friends Martha and Mary, who were sisters, experienced the loss of their brother, Lazarus. Jesus arrived at their home several days after Lazarus had died, and Jesus was so connected to Martha and Mary: He was so aware of their grievous loss and the pain they were feeling that he mourned and wept in anguish and in anger at the premature death of their brother; he just grieved and mourned with his two friends, Martha and Mary. Jesus was so connected to these women that he was able to relate to them and comfort them in a way that was truly helpful and meaningful.

Did you know that in order to care for someone in a way that's really helpful and meaningful and uplifting, we really need to know that person, their character, their temperament, their emotional state? If someone is just an acquaintance, we can try very sincerely to lift someone up, but we may end up bringing them further down.

The Proverbs talk about such a person who encounters someone with a heavy heart, and this person, probably with very good intentions, tries to cheer the other person up by singing a very happy song, but it's not what the other person wants to hear. The Proverb goes like this: "Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound, is one who sings songs" – that is, happy, upbeat songs – "to a heavy heart" (Proverbs 25:20). Here's a person who sees someone who's sad, doesn't really know the person and starts to sing a happy, upbeat song, but instead of making the person feel better, the person starts singing back – what's that song? "You're 'killing me softly..." I'm not going to sing it or else *I'm* going to be killing *you* softly! But it's just the wrong thing at the wrong time because the person doesn't know the person.

This year, we're in this emphasis called Life Together. But by Life Together, we don't mean Life Together *all the time*. The Proverb says, "A friend loves at all times" (Proverbs 17:17), but there's another Proverb that warns that if you step into your neighbour's house too often, "they will hate you" (Proverbs 25:17). So Life Together doesn't mean doing Life Together all the time! We need to know each other well enough to know when it's good to be together and when it's good to have some space. Khalil Gibran says, "[L]et there be spaces in your togetherness, And let the winds of the heavens dance between."

In order to care for another in a way that's helpful and meaningful and uplifting, we need to know each other, our temperaments, our circumstances, our emotional states.

I've been part of a small group for between 13 and 14 years, and everyone in this small group says that one of the best things about it is that we've known each other for so long that we know where we've come from; we know our tendencies and our temptations and our strengths and our weaknesses; we know where we've grown and where we've plateaued, such that when we offer a word of comfort or counsel or rebuke, it's actually really helpful. Because we know each other.

A true friend is someone who cares out of a deep knowing of us and vice versa. And the reason that we can care for others deeply is because we have first been cared for by Jesus Christ. Jesus says, paraphrasing verse 12, "As I have loved you, so love one another: As I have committed to you, and as I have cared for you, so love each other."

A true friend, as we see in Jesus, commits. A spiritual friend also cares.

And then, third: A true spiritual friend is candid.

Jesus says in our text, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. ...

[E]verything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you,” and therefore, we are called friends. Jesus says, “You are my friends ... for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” He is saying, “Everything that’s on my heart, I have disclosed to you.”

One of the signs of a true spiritual friendship is that people trust each other enough to shed the half-truths and to talk about their weaknesses, their vulnerabilities, their hopes, their dreams, their secrets. They're utterly candid with each other.

I've got a friend named David Bentall, whom some of you know; he and his family have worshipped here from time to time. David comes from a prominent business family here in Vancouver. He has given me permission to share this story.

David was travelling, and he was in a hotel room feeling lonely and really missing his wife, Alison. That night, David was especially drawn to the adult movie channel. He thought to himself, “No one will ever know. This is not going to hurt anyone.” So he watched an adult movie that night, and later, he felt this real sense of regret and shame. He realized that he hurt himself spiritually, at the very least.

He gets back home here to Vancouver and meets with Carson and Bob, who are also friends of mine, and he tells them what happened – he just confesses his sins.

Carson and Bob are very candid with David, and one of them says, “David, the next time you go on a business trip, I want you to check in to the hotel and tell the hotel clerk, ‘Block the adult movie channel in my room.’” David knew that it was a good idea, but he also felt like it would be really embarrassing to actually carry this plan out because, “After all,” David is saying, “I am a grown man.”

But his next business trip took him to California, and as David was checking in to the hotel, he asked the hotel clerk, “Would you please block the adult movie channels in my room?” As the clerk raised her eyebrow, David thought, “This is a little embarrassing, but I'd rather face the raised eyebrow of a hotel clerk I will probably never meet again rather than face the raised eyebrows of my friends Bob and Carson, whom I will be seeing for the rest of my life.”

David, Carson and Bob are in a true spiritual friendship. They are candid with each other. They confess their sins to each other. They challenge each other, sometimes with hard yet redeeming words. In the Book of Proverbs, we read that “The wounds of a friend are better than the kisses of an enemy” (Proverbs 27:6, *The Original Aramaic New Testament in Plain English*).

One time, Jesus was with one of his closest students, Peter, and Jesus was intimating that he was going to die this violent death, and Peter, out of very good intentions, is trying to redirect Jesus' intended trajectory and career path. But Jesus recognized that Peter was being influenced by the darkness, and so Jesus looked at Peter and said, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” (Matthew 16:23).

Sometimes Jesus will rebuke us with hard words that may feel like they wound us, but as the Proverbs say, “The wounds of a friend are better than the kisses of an enemy.” If Jesus wounds us with his candor, those wounds will ultimately heal us. He will speak transparently to us words of comfort, words of challenge, words of wisdom – and as we experience the candor of Jesus Christ, we can, in turn, be candid with the people who are our spiritual friends.

A true spiritual friend commits, a true spiritual friend cares, and a true spiritual friend is candid.

How do we enter into such a friendship?

First of all, pray.

As we look at Scripture, we see that friendships are orchestrated by God. God brings together David and Jonathan. God orchestrates the friendship of Ruth and Naomi. It is God who brings together Jesus and his disciples: In our passage tonight, Jesus says to his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.”

C. S. Lewis, in his book on friendship, *The Four Loves*, writes:

[I]n Friendship ... we think we have chosen our peers. ... [But a] secret Master of the Ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,” can truly say to every group of Christian friends “You have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another.” The Friendship is not a reward for our discrimination and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others.

And so God *does* work to bring friends together, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t participate in the process. So we pray, but we also ask – we also *make an ask*.

You know how it is: If you’re single and you’re about to ask someone out, or you admire someone and you’re thinking about asking that person to be a mentor to you, you’re filled with a sense of anticipation and hope and possibility, but at the same time, you’re filled with a bit of anxiety and fear of potential rejection. When you ask someone out or when you ask someone to be a mentor, there’s risk involved; but if you don’t ask, chances are the door to a relationship will not open.

So it is with a potential spiritual friendship. We, in most cases, need to make an ask, and that ask may feel like a risk, but the risk may lead to a friendship. And so we can ask, and if the person says, “Yes, we can meet maybe once or twice or three times and see if there is a sense of connection and chemistry.” If so, maybe discuss the possibility of meeting for a few months or maybe half a year and then re-evaluate it.

Next Sunday, our emphasis for the coming year, Life Together, will officially launch. And so I’m going to ask you next Sunday— I want you to be prepared to answer this question. I (or one of the ushers) will be giving each of you a card, and this is the question that we will be asking: “With God’s help, will you commit to meeting at least monthly with a small group or a spiritual friend to openly share your lives, pray for each other and encourage one another to grow in your relationship with Jesus?” If you’re up for that – it’s not forever, in terms of Life Together, but until June of next year – then we’re going to invite you to check that off, and we’ll be praying for you. So come prepared to make a commitment next Sunday.

So, we pray for spiritual friendships, we ask, and then, third: We be a friend.

You know what the golden rule of spiritual friendship or friendship in general is? The golden rule for friendship is the Golden Rule! In other words: Be the friend to others that you would want them to be to you.

If you will become the kind of friend that your heart desires, then, in time, you will have all the friends your heart needs.

How do we become the kind of friend that our heart desires? Well, it’s by experiencing great friendship from Jesus Christ.

My mentor is an older Presbyterian minister named Leighton Ford, and Leighton, in years gone by, used to travel the world with his brother-in-law Billy Graham and preach in some of the biggest football stadiums in the world. Leighton has spent the last couple of decades of his life focusing in on a relatively small group of younger,

emerging leaders, pouring his life into them, mentoring them. He's invited some other people to join him as mentors in his mentoring family, and whenever Leighton is thinking about bringing on a mentor into his ministry family, he always asks, "Has this person been mentored themselves?" Because the best way to become a mentor is to have experienced mentoring yourself.

Similarly, the best way to become a true friend to someone else is to have experienced true friendship from someone else, and it is in our friendship with Jesus Christ that we learn what true spiritual friendship is all about because Jesus is the one who has ultimately committed to us, cared for us, and is completely candid with us.

Anne Lamott is an author whose writing I love, and she has written this prayer:

Hi, God.

I am just a mess.

It is all hopeless.

What else is new?

I would be sick of me, if I were You, but miraculously, You are not.

I know I have no control over other people's lives, and I hate this. Yet I believe that if I accept this and surrender, You will meet me wherever I am.

Wow. Can this be true? If so, how is this afternoon – say, two-ish?

Thank You in advance for Your company and blessings.

You have never once let me down.

Amen.

Anne says, "You have never once let me down." And Anne is a very candid person.

Jesus Christ is a friend who will never let you down, and when you understand just how incredibly committed he is to you and you experience that commitment, you, in turn, can offer that commitment to another.

Jesus is also the one who knows how ruined you are and how beautiful you are. He knows how marred you are and yet how magnificent you are – and yet he loves you like no one else. He loves you as if you were the only person on the earth. As someone has said, the one who knows us best loves us most, and it is out of our experience of being deeply cared for by Jesus that we can offer real care to other people.

Finally, Jesus will be completely candid with you and me. He will comfort us when we need to be comforted. He will challenge us when we need to be challenged. He will wound us when we need to be wounded – but "[b]etter are the wounds of a friend than the ... kisses of an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6 DRA).

As I mentioned earlier tonight and have mentioned over the last several weeks, we are in an emphasis called Life Together, and, admittedly, Life Together is sometimes more complicated; it's messier. But "Life Together," as my colleague Ken Pierce says, "is better" because it is richer, deeper and always more profoundly transformative.

Jesus Christ, the greatest friend there ever was, says to you and to me, "I no longer call you servants ... Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" as well.

Experience the extraordinary friendship of Jesus Christ, and then offer the gift of friendship to others. As you do, may you become the friend your heart longs for, and may you have all the friends you need.

Let's pray together.

I wonder if, tonight, Jesus Christ is inviting you into a deeper friendship with himself. If so, why not respond to that invitation by saying, "Yes, I want to go deeper in my friendship with you. I don't know exactly what that's

going to look like, but I want to take the plunge and go deeper”?

[silence]

And out of that deepening friendship with Jesus, would you pray that, as you receive his commitment, his care and his candor, you would become for others the kind of friend that your own heart longs for?

[silence]

And Jesus, we just want to say, on this Sunday in particular: Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you for being such an awesome friend. Wow, you're incredible.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What are the qualities of a true spiritual friend?
- How does our friendship with Jesus help us become a true friend?

RECOMMENDED READING

Bentall, David C. *The Company You Keep: The Transforming Power of Male Friendship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004.

Shigematsu, Ken. “Friendship: Companions for the Journey.” *God in My Everything*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

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