

The Joy of Friendship

Mark 2:1-5

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One of my oldest friends is here today. He's not old in years, though he did just turn forty. I mean that our friendship is long-lived, rich and deep, having carried us through celebrations and times of trial.

Jason and I met in seventh grade, in junior high school, and for twenty-six years now we've been discussing the finer points of Star Trek, Civil War history, Broadway musicals, and American politics. I was there the day his second son was born, and he attended my father's funeral. We were each other's best men at our weddings. And, if I needed help hiding a body, it's Jason who I would call. Metaphorically speaking, of course.

Aristotle wrote that friendship is the greatest external good. That friendship is essential for the good life. He even wrote that you can't be a virtuous person without friends.

Now, according to Aristotle, there are three different types of friends. First are friendships for utility. These are basically those people that you build relationships with because you are working on something together and you need to get along in order to accomplish your goals.

The second type are friendships of pleasure—basically those people you are friends with because you get pleasure from being around them. These sorts of friendships will come and go because, as Aristotle said, people change and become less pleasurable.

But there is another level of friendship that he called "complete" friendship. These friendships are long-lasting, deep, and committed. You share your life with these people. It's these sorts of friendships that are necessary for the good life. And I would add that these sorts of friendships sustain and even heal us.

The poem read earlier was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In April 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo for participating in the assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler. The assassination attempt that failed, of course.

Bonhoeffer was a great theologian who was disgusted that the established German churches supported the Nazis. He became a leader in the Confessing Church movement, which was a group of Christians who separated themselves from the established churches. While teaching in the underground seminary at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer met Eberhard Bethge and they became close friends. Bethge wrote that it was "impossible to imagine [Bonhoeffer] without his friends." During those difficult years when they were engaged in subversive actions, their group of family and friends would gather to play music, to discuss theology, and to celebrate life. When they were parted, they wrote letters to one another. Bethge later wrote, "even when turning points intruded which were anything but pleasurable and in fact

brought genuine suffering—[this tradition] was never interrupted. Indeed, it was precisely at those times that they managed to pass on these values [of friendship] to children and grandchildren.”

During his imprisonment, when he had to resort to smuggling coded messages to Bethge, Bonhoeffer began to reflect on the nature of friendship. He believed that in such dangerous times, it was his Christian faith which allowed him to maintain his friendships and to “take pleasure in something with an easy mind.” Why did he think this?

Because our Christian story gives us a unique perspective that is hopeful. Our Christian story tells us that God is sovereign and that we can trust the promises of God, no matter how difficult the present circumstances may be. Even the darkest of moments will not last. Good Fridays come, but so do Easter mornings. Even death does not have final and absolute power. During difficult and dangerous days a Christian has the courage to enjoy life because a Christian does not believe his actions are in vain.

Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazis on April 9, 1945, two weeks before American troops liberated the prison where he had been kept. Bethge devoted the rest of his life to remembering his dear friend.

Friendships sustain us. They also heal us.

A decade ago I was serving as an Associate Pastor for Ray Vickrey. Ray is over six foot tall and generally has a big smile. He has a confidence and an ease which make for a winning disposition. His boldly white hair, always perfectly in place, graces him with an aura of wisdom.

Attending a denominational meeting with Ray was always an experience. For instance, once the annual gathering of the Baptist General Convention of Texas was held in the convention center in San Antonio. This is a meeting of a few thousand people, a little larger than our Nebraska Conference Annual Gatherings. Our group from Royal Lane could often be found in the exhibit hall, browsing books and chatting with colleagues. At least thirty minutes before you really wanted to head to lunch, you’d have to get organized and start leading Ray in that direction, for you’d only get about fifty feet, if you were lucky, before some pastor would come up to Ray and shake hands vigorously, and then pull him aside for an intense conversation, as that pastor had been looking specifically for Ray, needing his advice. Getting to and from lunch became quite an endeavor.

Ray had pastored Royal Lane Baptist Church for almost 25 years. He turned 70 while I was working with him, and he began thinking that maybe he should begin thinking about retirement.

Ray would tell you that the reason he succeeded in ministry was because he learned to cultivate friendships. His closest group of clergy friends called themselves “the Neighborhood.” Six clergy who had been meeting together twice a year, usually for four days at a time, for about fifteen years. One thing I learned quickly as an Associate Pastor was that these two weeks were probably the most important two weeks on Ray’s calendar.

What originated as bull sessions to complain about Baptist politics and the routine annoyances of clergy life, developed over time into deep, rich friendships which helped to sustain each of those men through personal crises and professional troubles.

In 2004, one of those clergy, Kyle Childress, the pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church

in Nacogdoches, Texas, wrote an essay about this group of friends and that essay was published as the cover story in *The Christian Century*. Entitled "Company of Friends: Six pastors make a sabbath."

Kyle wrote that whenever they got together, it usually took them a couple of days "to detoxify from busy-ness."

Often Nathan can be found in a hammock taking a nap while Ray is smoking his pipe on the porch and Larry is sifting his way through a stack of good books. . . . Charlie puts the brisket on in the morning for us to enjoy for supper. Joe, who can't sit still, might chop wood for the smoker while I watch a herd of white-faced Hereford cows graze amidst live oak and mesquite trees and relish the fact that I don't have to organize them to accomplish a task.

What they learned was that their friendships needed this time of rest, spent together, in order for them to get below the surface. But once they made the effort of resting together, they experienced healing. Kyle wrote:

Our health is connected with one another, and we sense that we are more ourselves when we are together than when we are separate. . . . Sabbath, friendship, and salvation are connected.

And it is at this point that we connect back with today's Gospel reading, for Kyle said that he, Ray, and their other friends were "like the paralyzed man carried by his four friends who lowered him through the roof to bring him to Jesus."

When it comes to friendship, the work of love is rarely *work* at all. It is, in fact, finding rest by spending time with one another. Yet for many of us with our to do lists, full calendars, and distracting mobile phones, resting is getting to be more and more difficult work. Which makes it all that much more important to do.

While Jason and his wife Carrie have been here this weekend, we've done a lot of sightseeing and shopping. We've been to the zoo and the Farmer's Market, browsed thrift shops in the Old Market and played arcade games in Benson. We ate dinner last night at Guaca Maya, right next to a giant screen broadcasting Mexican soap operas. Even without the advantage of language, we knew exactly what was going on.

But maybe the best moment of this weekend came yesterday afternoon, when we drove up to the Lewis and Clark Monument that overlooks the Missouri River and the metro area. It was peaceful and the sun was warm, but not hot, and we sat on a bench for a long time, watching the river and the highway and the occasional plane landing or taking off. And we hardly spoke a word.

My encouragement to you is to spend some time this summer with your closest friends doing the things that bring you rest, sustenance, and healing. For these practices not only maintain our relationships, they also draw us closer to God. For in our friendships, as in all of our loves, God is working through us, giving of God's self to us.

So, after worship today Jason and I are going to do a little bit more of God's work before

he and Carrie have to leave. We're going to Big Mama's to stuff ourselves with fried chicken and sweet tea. And we might just end up debating the effectiveness of various generals in the Second World War or whether J. J. Abrams is ruining *Star Trek* (Jason doesn't think so).

But what's happening in those moments, as ridiculous as they may seem to our spouses, is joy.