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Texts: Luke 10: 38-42; John 15: 12-15  
March 6, 2022

### I Have Called You Friends

Here's a story I recently heard about someone who needed a basic form of human contact, but who couldn't find it. The story is about a man named Kevin Hines. He was suffering from feelings of isolation and loneliness, as well as other, more acute forms of mental illness. He was living in San Francisco, and one day, he set off on a walk across the city. His destination was the Golden Gate Bridge. The purpose of his walk was to get to the bridge, and then to hurl himself off of it. But he gave himself an out: he reasoned that he wouldn't do it if, during his walk, just one person acknowledged his existence. Just one person. He wouldn't jump if just one person sensed, and recognized, his humanity. No one did on his entire walk. Then, upon reaching the bridge, it seemed like things were about to change. A few tourists did hail him, asking if he would take their picture. But it was a transactional encounter. They didn't notice his tears. They didn't recognize his personhood, really. It only made him feel more alone. And so when he reached the middle of the bridge, he sealed his fate. He stepped into the air.

As soon as he did, Hines realized that he had made a mistake. In the four seconds between letting go and hitting the water, he changed his mind. He knew in those quick seconds that he wished to live. Somehow, the impact on the water didn't kill him. But he broke all sorts of bones, and he wasn't able to keep himself afloat. But then he felt something brushing against him in the water. Thinking it was a shark, and he punched at it. But that's not what it was. It was a sea lion. And that sea lion kept nudging Hines up to the surface of the water, preventing his body from sinking, until the Coast Guard arrived to rescue him.

I'm drawn to that story both because of what didn't happen for Kevin Hines, and because of what did happen to him. It's terribly haunting that on a walk across a city, he didn't find a single person who acknowledged not only his presence, but his personhood. That seems like a devastating indictment of the atomization of our culture, and of our lives. For any number of reasons, we live in a time and a place in which our relationships function in what Martin Buber called I-It encounters, rather than I-Thou encounters. I-It encounters are transactional and instrumental, like the tourists asking Hines to take their picture. I-Thou encounters, even if brief, recognize the mystery at the core of every human life, and suggest the dignity and complexity of that life. We need I-Thou encounters with one another if we are to survive and thrive as human beings. We need to know that we're seen, and understood. Most of all, I think we need to know in the core of our being not only that we're loved, which is a fairly general thing to say, but that we're liked, in the specificity of our quirks, traits, and habits. I'm haunted that Kevin Hines didn't have any sense of an I-Thou relationality with those around him. He's not unusual in that regard. If we're honest, many of us sense that we're missing those traits in our relational lives.

Even so, I'm also powerfully drawn to the fact that even as there were no people who really acknowledged him, an animal did. That's an astonishing piece of the story. It suggests the possibility of an essentially benign world, that is conducive to human flourishing. It suggests that possibility – a possibility known to many animal lovers in our midst – that the creatures around us can sense our needs, and can work to meet them – even by pushing a drowning man to the surface of the water. Of course, the ways human beings respond to that essentially benign

character of the world matters immensely, exerting pressures, and responses, that feel anything but benign. Still, in this particular case, when human relationality faltered, another form of relationship filled the void.

A few months ago we explored several characters who form a kind of second tier of disciples, outside of the twelve we know. There was Lazarus, a character who prematurely enters a tomb, and who Jesus rescues from the tomb. Lazarus has two sisters as well, both of whom feature prominently in the Gospels – Mary and Martha. They’ve been immortalized in generations of sermons and theological tracts as exemplifying the virtues, or limitations, of the active life on one hand, and the contemplative life on the other. According to the prevailing understanding of the story, Jesus places greater emphasis upon the contemplative life, gently chiding Martha as a busybody, while commending Mary for her faithful attention. If you were here a few months ago, you’ll know that I think Martha gets a bad rap. Reading against the grain of the text, with the help of a radical theologian named Meister Eckhart, I argued that Martha is the figure we need for an embodied, public, earthy, and activist form of 21<sup>st</sup> century theology. I love Martha for her insistence upon food, upon tending to the needs of those around her, and for the preparations she makes so that an event – a visit from Jesus – can actually take place, and go well. She stands for all of the facilitators, the producers, the planners, and the cooks who don’t take center stage, but who make things work, so that those around them can thrive. I love the biblical Martha, but I also love all the figurative Marthas that I have known, who know how to get stuff done.

But I love Mary too. Way back when, I promised a sermon on Mary to round out our consideration of this sibling family, and I’m here today to deliver on that promise. Rather than focusing upon the contemplative aspects of Mary, however, I want us to consider something more basic, and really more obvious, about her character. She’s relational. She’s shirking her chores around the house, perhaps, but she’s engaged in something that’s at least as important as food for the nourishment and flourishing of human lives: she’s forging a relationship. She’s building an I-Thou encounter with her guest. No doubt Martha is working hard behind the scenes, and no doubt it looks to many like Mary is just sitting still. But I would argue that Mary is also engaged in difficult and important work in that moment. If you don’t believe me, think about what it takes to build and to work on a friendship, a genuine I-Thou relationship. That comes easy when we’re children, but as we age, it becomes harder and harder to do. Maybe we just don’t have opportunities for it. Maybe we lose the social skills required to forge new relationships. Or maybe we just grow skeptical that putting in that work will lead to anything much more than small talk, an I-It exchange, like the tourists asking Kevin Hine to take their picture. But there’s Mary, seated next to Jesus, doing the hard work of relating to somebody. Mary stands for that deep human need among us to be in proximity to others, to be treated as an end, and not a means toward something else, and to bond with someone in a moment of genuine human exchange.

Churches ought to be places that facilitate that sense that sense of I-Thou relationship. And sometimes, they genuinely are. I’m a minister today, in large part, because I sense that churches are some of the last places in our world that still cultivate that kind of relationality. But it doesn’t always work that way, especially in the Protestant Mainline. Quite often, that’s especially so in New England, where we tend to be less emotionally demonstrative than in other parts of the world. Let me speak personally here: I remember going to church in graduate school some Sundays, hoping to find a sense of belonging among the other people there. But for a long time, I actually felt lonelier when I left the church than when I arrived. That changed over time,

but it meant persisting through some really lonely Sundays. The people who knew each other spoke among themselves. Other people slipped in and then quietly slipped out, there mostly for their own private reasons. In time, just because of my dogged presence there, I was asked to serve on some boards and committees, and that helped to open up some relationships. But sometimes even that felt transactional – as if I were useful to a cause or purpose, rather than being seen and valued for who I was. Over the years, I did form some lasting and meaningful relationships, even what I would call I-Thou relationships. But it took a lot of painstaking work to get there.

I occupy a different place within this congregation, and so I don't always know how it feels to be out there in the pews. But I share that story because I hope that each of you feels some measure of connection to other human beings as a result of being here on Sunday mornings. And I especially hope that you don't leave here feeling the way I occasionally did upon leaving church in those years. Still, I have a hunch that all churches, and all communities, function that way to some degree or other. I have a hunch that we always have to work hard to overcome anonymity, or cliquishness, or instrumentality in the way we relate to one another. I think that's especially true of the Protestant Mainline, and of the Protestant Mainline in New England.

Sometimes I wonder if that legendary New England reserve is a reflection of a deeper theology that we carry around, consciously and unconsciously. I wonder if it reflects the way we imagine God, and how think that God relates to us. I wonder if sometimes we're distant from each other because God feels distant to us. And I wonder if when we relate to one another instrumentally, we do so because we imagine that's how God relates to us – as instruments, or tools, in a greater social or theological purpose. Here's what I mean: isn't it true that we often imagine that God is interested in us only insofar as we can be useful toward accomplishing some greater good? Evangelicals are especially prone to this – the love of God is made conditional upon a personal response, which is intended to make one wish to spread that love to others. We in the Mainline churches don't think in quite the same way, but I do think we share that tendency. What God wants, we say, is to make the world a little more compassionate, or a little more hospitable, or a little more just. I'm glad we say those things, but I worry sometimes that that they betray a hint of that instrumentality in our theology, where we become valued only insofar as we further those ends.

A few years ago, I ran into someone who had joined our church, and then had abruptly quit showing up. I asked her about that, and she chose to be honest with me. She said, "I quit coming to church because there was always some cause, all of them good, all of them important, that I was supposed to pour myself into, or write a check for." What she was telling me, in her own way, I think, is that she felt instrumentalized when she came. She felt as though she was a part of a transaction. She felt as though we weren't seeing her, in all of her complex and mysterious thou-ness.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says something really profound to his disciples that we tend to overlook. "I have called you friends," he says. It's a passage that our Sunday School has been studying all year. Because of that passage, I like to imagine that perhaps it is not only we who have a tendency to become isolated, but that God feels that way as well. Because of that passage, I like to imagine that perhaps God has felt instrumentalized by human beings, who tend to call upon the name of God as a transaction, in order to effect this or that change within the world, or within their own lives. I like to believe that the incarnation is itself God's way of declaring a deep divine need, one that we ourselves recognize all too well: the need for friends. Might it be that, far from being instruments or pawns within a greater divine purpose, in reality, God simply

wishes for our friendship? Might it be that God not only loves you – the way parents are required to love their children - but genuinely likes you, relishing your individuality, cherishing your quirks, enjoying your company? Might that be the deepest meaning of Jesus’s pronouncement to his disciples? Might that be precisely what’s happening when he sits down and enjoys the company of Mary, and Mary with him?

For all the things that need to get done to keep a church functional – boards, committees, finances, and all the rest - and for all the ways that Christian faith does obligate us to organize and move in particular ways, I hope we work overtime as a community to ensure that this is a place that enacts a theology of visitation, a theology anti-instrumentality, a theology of being liked. I hope we’re a place that models what it is to cherish one another, to enjoy one another, to sit with one another, and just *like* one another in some basic and fundamental sense. I hope you know that I do experience this place in that way, but I want it to be true of everyone, and not just me. That’s why it’s so important that we push ourselves from week to week to introduce ourselves to those around us if you don’t know them, to learn one another’s names, even if we’ve already asked a dozen times, and to go to the trouble of making what may feel like superficial chit-chat with one another. Across weeks, and then years, that superficial chit chat can add up to something profound. It adds up to a sense of belonging, to a sense of being grounded somewhere, to a sense of being known, liked, and valued as a person. It may not feel like it’s leading anywhere, but I promise, it is. That’s the lesson of Mary that I would have us learn.

The lesson of Mary is important to our personal well being in a lonely and atomized world. It’s important for our sense of God. But it’s important in another way as well. Like many of you, I’ve found myself doom scrolling over the past week, in a sense of horrified fascination at what’s occurring in Ukraine, and really, now throughout the entirety of the world. I don’t yet know what it all means, or where it’s all heading. None of us do. But one of the people I’ve turned to for understanding and perspective is Timothy Snyder, a historian of modern Europe who teaches at Yale. He’s written extensively on Ukraine and Russia, but he’s also written a thoughtful little book called *On Tyranny* about what it means to resist authoritarian trends developing across the globe. It’s a book composed of twenty simple lessons, learned from observing the rise of fascist movements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Snyder’s target audience isn’t Europeans, however. It’s we in America, who have flirted with many of those same tendencies over the past five to six years. It turns out the lesson of Mary has implications for the preservation of democracy as well.

It was lesson #12 in Snyder’s book that leapt out at me this week: make eye contact and small talk. That particular piece of advice has both a negative and a positive valence. Negatively, he argues that one of the first things that happens when countries take an authoritarian turn is that neighbors begin to avoid one another. Instead of engaging in small acts of conversation, or greeting one another, they cross the street. In other words, something shifts in the basic relationality of the country, and it’s a harbinger of the culture of denunciation and mistrust that soon follows. Engaging in small talk and making eye contact, Snyder argues, can be a way of reading a situation, taking the temperature of what’s happening around you in any given moment. That’s the negative valence. Positively, though, Snyder argues that those ordinary gestures can be ways of indicating to other, especially immigrants, or otherwise marginalized populations who have been made to feel as though they don’t belong, that they do, in fact, merit acknowledgment, that they do, in fact, belong. Eye contact and small talk form the basic relational grammar of a society, a kind of sentence structure upon which greater social meaning

can be built – a sense of neighborliness, and togetherness, a sense of decency and belonging, that most of us want and need.

Snyder's insight is corroborated by another giant of European political thought. On the final page of Hannah Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she quotes Genesis 2:18, words that are spoken by God in the Garden of Eden: "It is not good for humans to be alone." Loneliness, Arendt suggests, is the fertile seedbed in which authoritarian tendencies grow. We in the West have been cultivating that seedbed for a long time now. It's had disastrous implications for our emotional and bodily health. There have been troublesome implications for our theologies, for our sense of God and of one another. And it's led to some frightening consequences for democracies.

We need the witness of Martha in a digitized and disembodied world, a witness that allows us to recognize the importance of processes that unfold behind the scenes to create moments of embodied care. But we also need to find our way to Mary, who understood the basic grammar of relationality, who understood the importance of stopping for a while, just to visit, just to know one another a little better. Her insight might keep people at the edge of despair, like Kevin Hines, alive and well. Her insight might prevent people from walking away from a place like this feeling more alone than when they had arrived. Her example may be one of the practices crucial for keeping democracy itself vital.

I have called you friends, Jesus said. May we do the same for one another.