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Text: John 15: 12-17
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“I Have Called You Friends”

“The most radical thing you can do is to introduce people to one another.” So says a bumper sticker that I display on a bookshelf in my office upstairs, a reminder of one of the essential functions of what it is to be a church community. We each of us show up at church for a host of different reasons, but I would guess that the single greatest desire that brings most of you here is a desire to connect, to be known by others, and to know them in turn. I know there are exceptions. There are some among us who just want to slip in and out of church without much contact. If that’s true of you, well, so be it. But for most of us, we actually desire some version of what the old theme song from “Cheers” projected - a place “where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came.”

One might think that would happen naturally in a church. And sometimes, thankfully, it does. I’ve observed clusters of hospitality in the pews out there, and it’s wonderful to see. I’ve seen many of you working to extend yourselves, to greet and to know those you encounter here. But there are other times, despite our best efforts, when our New England Congregational reserve can make it hard to know and be known. I remember attending a church in New Haven where for years, I felt lonelier upon leaving than I had when I arrived, mostly because I didn’t really feel known in that place. I waited it out, and eventually felt glad to be a member of that community, but man, that New England reserve was hard to crack. FCCOL has always seemed different to me, but to be honest, I don’t really know what it’s like to sit out there as a congregant Sunday by Sunday. It seems like a lot of really great connections are happening, but I also worry from time to time that there are those who may slip through the cracks, and may feel pretty alone in this place. To name one example, I was sad to learn a few weeks ago that someone had visited our community late in the summer, and, aside from the deacons at the door, they reported that they weren’t greeted by a single person, and that as a result, the place felt cold and unfriendly. That can happen. I know. But I’d like to ensure that we do all we can for it not to happen.

I frankly believe that, after Covid, FCCOL is in a period of rebuilding. There are a lot of familiar faces around here. But there are an awful lot of new faces in this place as well, and I want to find ways to build sustaining bonds among us all, so that five, ten, fifteen years from now, we can each point to a handful of people, and maybe more than a handful of people, that we know and trust in this community as friends. In my parents’ and grandparents’ generations, and to a degree in my own, houses of worship have been one of the primary places in our society that provide the basis for building lasting friendships. Societally, we lose a good many things when churches cease to function well, but among the most far reaching is that we lose one of the basic social mechanisms we have for making friends. And so a part of our rebuilding at FCCOL must be to open ourselves to one another, as friends. Let me offer two reasons for concentrating our efforts upon friendship.

According to some recent studies, loneliness - the lack of binding friendships - is one of the deadliest afflictions currently plaguing people in the United States. The US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, has raised the alarm, noting in a recent report that loneliness leads to “a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk

of developing dementia for older adults.”¹ Additionally, research has shown that, “lacking social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%.”² And that’s not even accounting for the mental health consequences of loneliness, which I don’t need to tell you, are massive. As I see it, churches can and should be a part of alleviating that isolation. Further, if many people show up in church precisely because they feel afflicted by loneliness, it would be a shame if we somehow failed to respond proactively. So, for the sake of our bodily and emotional well-being, I will, in just a few minutes, ask us all to go out of our way to make a friend. It might save someone’s life. It might save your life.

That’s my first reason. Here’s my second: friendship is built into the fabric of our faith. In fact, it’s foundational. Jesus ordains it. In the Gospel of John, he speaks openly to his disciples about friendship, telling them not that they have roles to fill for the sake of God’s kingdom, or functions to perform for the sake of the Gospel. He’s not interested in his disciples, in other words, in a transactional way, because they can do a job for him. Instead, he’s interested in them as people: “I have called you friends,” he says. Reading between the lines just a little bit, it almost seems as though that’s what God has been searching for all along - for friends. It is from isolation that God creates the first humans, and throughout the Bible we see God seeking out that friendship over and over again - with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with Moses, with David, and with the prophets. But in Jesus, that longing for companionship comes to a pinnacle, for it is only by becoming vulnerable flesh that such companionship can be found. In Jesus, we find God desiring our friendship.

But it’s also true that God is to be found in our friendships. That too is a pattern we can discern throughout the Bible - in Moses and Aaron, in Ruth and Naomi, in David and Jonathan, and in Paul and Silas. But I think it’s most true in Jesus and the disciples. In the Bible, quite often it’s friendship that helps to mediate the experience of God. That’s how it was for Jesus and his friends. You see, as often as not, it’s in friendship that we come to understand what God might be like. A friend seeks out the best for us. They reach out in acts of tenderness and care. They listen well. They are the ones with whom we can let down our guard, with whom we can laugh or weep freely. With a friend, we can bare our soul without fear of rejection or judgment. And sometimes, friends sacrifice for one another, as Jesus says, “laying down their lives for one another.” That’s the kind of relationship that Jesus was forming among his disciples, and I believe that many of us are hungry for those same qualities. When we find them, we encounter God.

Over the past several months, I’ve been conducting an exercise among our Boards. At the end of each meeting, we draw names, and the assignment is to go have coffee or lunch with the person whose name has been drawn. They are to spend an hour or so getting to know one another, asking questions about where they have lived, what they have done for a living, and who their family is. But then I’ve asked them to go deeper as well, if they’re willing, and to ask questions like, what does faith mean to you, why do you come to church, and what gets you up in the morning these days, and maybe most especially, what are you going through right now. The goal is to break through the walls of our New England reserve, so that we know one another not only by sitting in a Board meeting, but that we actually come to *know* one another in the fullness

¹ See a press release from the Department of Health and Human Services, May 3, 2023, “New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States.”

² Ibid.

of our being. It's a way of building a stronger church. It's a way of contributing to our sense of well being. And it's a way of fulfilling our spiritual mandate to have and to be...friends.

This morning, I'd like to invite you to do something similar. Here's the exercise: In each of your bulletins, you'll find a 3x5 card, and there are pens at the end of each of your rows. There are pew pencils as well. If you're willing, if I can persuade you, I'd like to invite you to write your name, your email address, and your phone number on that card. At the end of the service, after communion, you can fold the card in half, and drop it into this big wooden bowl, which will be in front of the communion table. Later this week, I'll randomly draw two cards at a time from the bowl, and I'll send each of you an email, putting the two of you in touch. And then, at some point in the next few weeks, I'd like you to find a time to have lunch or coffee. It doesn't need to be long. And you don't need to unload your entire life story in that first meeting. But just spend time hearing from one another, asking open ended questions about your lives, and see where the conversation takes you - where did you grow up? Tell me about your parents. What did you do for a living? What are the things that give you life? What's important about church? What's important in general? When the conversation is over, you're not obliged to be best friends, though I'd be delighted if that happened. But at the very least, you'll know somebody in these pews a little better, which will go a long way toward helping you, toward helping us all, to feel known when we come to this place. We'll do this exercise again, on the first Sunday of November, and then December, and so on. Little by little, conversation by conversation, a whole network of relationships will begin to form that wouldn't otherwise have existed.

If you don't want to do this, that's fine. It's completely voluntary. And if you already know the person to which you're assigned, well, do it anyway. It won't be wasted time. And if you don't connect deeply with the person to whom you're assigned, so what? You're not marrying the person - you're just having a conversation, which I know can feel risky.

But do you know what? The most radical thing we can do is to introduce people to one another. Most of us are dying for this kind of contact, and anyway, Jesus would want you to do it! "I have called you friends," he says. Let's make it so among ourselves.