

limited. Should their interests change so shall their friendship. They will drift apart. But two Christians face friendship differently. Why? Because our friendship with Jesus redefines all other friendships. Because of my friendship with Jesus, I am compelled to be a very different kind of friend.

Do you see how Jesus changes us? Do you see how it is so very important? Because unless I'm Jesus' friend I have no deep soul level desire to please him, to live up to his high standard, to let his unique love flow through me.

Robert Hugh Benson, a catholic priest from the early 20th century once wrote a beautiful little book entitled Friendship of Christ, where he said, "There is one supreme friendship to which all human friendship points, one ideal friend in whom we find, perfect and complete, that for which we look in the faces of our human lovers."

Friendship is so very important. So many of us try to go without it. But do you see how essential it is to Jesus? Our friendships are one of Jesus' most important tools he has for sharing his love and light in the world.

Do you see how your friendship with Him changes the nature of all your other friendships? It's not something to do for your own self-focussed happiness but it's missional – it's the way that God's love spreads through the world.

Robert Hugh Bensen once wrote a poem that describes the nature of Christ's friendship with us. He writes,

Let me tell you how I made His acquaintance.

I had heard much of Him, but took no heed.

He sent daily gifts and presents, but I never thanked Him.

He often seemed to want my friendship, but I remained cold.

I was homeless, and wretched, and starving and in peril every hour; and He offered me shelter and comfort and food and safety; but I was ungrateful still.

At last He crossed my path and with tears in His eyes He besought me saying, Come and abide with me.

Let me tell you how he treats me now.

He supplies all my wants.

He gives me more than I dare ask.

He anticipates my every need.

He begs me to ask for more.

He never reminds me of my past ingratitude.

He never rebukes me for my past follies.

Let me tell you further what I think of Him.

He is as good as He is great.

His love is as ardent as it is true.

He is as lavish of His promises as He is faithful in keeping them.

He is as jealous of my love as He is deserving of it.

I am in all things His debtor, but He bids me call Him Friend.

Jesus calls you his friend. What do you call him? Is he the one you enjoy more than any other? If you do, it will make you a better friend – a whole other kind. You will have resources for friendship that surpass anything you could ever muster on your own. You will have a mission for friendship. You will have a desire to let your friendship with Jesus overflow into your friendships with others.

Because when Jesus is your friend, you will be able to give yourself away as if it was a competition of love, as if it is a race to the back of the line, as if love was an endlessly renewable resource – because when Jesus is your friend, it is.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

“Made for it: Friendship”

November 5th, 2023 — Selby United Church — Scripture: John 15:9-17

By Rev. Mike Putnam

“Once there was a tree...and she loved a little boy.” This is how the story called The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein begins. It's a children's book which offers a profound parable of happiness, consumerism and most important of all, friendship.

The story goes like this: When the boy is young, the tree gives to him her leaves for a crown, her branches for him to climb, and her apples for him to enjoy. “And the boy loved the tree...and the tree was happy.”

But as time goes by, the boy becomes a young man. His simple childlike enjoyment of the tree for what she was changes. Now he wants money and possessions. So, the tree, loving the young man, gives him her apples to sell by the cartload. And the tree was happy.

Years go by, and the boy-now-a-man desires a house to raise his family in, so the tree, loving him, tells him to cut off her branches and build his house. And the tree was happy.

More years go by, and the boy comes back in his middle age wanting a boat to sail away from the monotony of life. So, the tree, loving the boy, gives her trunk to him for a boat, and the boy sails away. And there she is, reduced to nothing more than a stump, left alone again.

Then one day, the boy, now in the dusk of his years, returns to the tree weary from his life. All he desires now is a place to rest. And the tree, loving the boy, invites him to come sit upon her stump. And the tree was happy.

This is a profound story that shocks us in a sense. And in the 50 years since it

was first published, it continues to challenge its readers. One New York Times review said it best, “Is it a tender story of unconditional love or a disturbing tale of selfishness?”

Yet, for us it's a story that pokes at the very meaning of human life. This morning Jesus tells us “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

As we look back at the people who have loved us well – friends, family members, a spouse, we cannot help but see that the way they loved us best was in the way they gave themselves for us and to us.

But here's where we run into difficulty. Because even as we look back wistfully on those important relationships, I have no doubt that those very same relationships raise questions about why they never seem to fully satisfy us. All of our human relationships have the potential to make us feel loved and whole and to give our lives meaning – yet so often they don't live up to their full potential.

Why do our friendships, family relationships and marriages never seem to fully scratch our itch for deep and profound love and acceptance? Why do we so often struggle in these areas? Well, that's the question we will be seeking to address in this sermon series.

And the answer is that all these vitally important relationships are not intended to be ends unto themselves but pointers to what we are truly made for. They are gifts of love from the God who is love.

But this is where we may run into some conflicting ideas. Because our culture tells us, in every way it knows how, that our purpose is to discover deep within ourselves

our true identity. My life is all about me! I'm on a quest for self-discovery. I'm learning who I really am, honing my skills, building my resume, finding my own happiness. And that's why the story, *The Giving Tree*, challenges us.

Because the narrative that says, "It's all about me," naturally leads us in the direction of loneliness. That narrative will always drive us away from what we were made for. That narrative will always leave us unsatisfied on a most basic level because it misses the point.

As Christians we believe that this world was made for love by a God who is love. And God made this world as a stage for love sharing that is both vertically oriented (us and God) but also horizontally oriented (us and one another). So, living for myself and my own happiness perverts this intended purpose. It can never lead me to true contentment and flourishing.

Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last..."

So our telos (in the Greek) – or the thing we're made for is not to find myself, but to follow Jesus more and more, giving myself away in love. Any other way of living will be unsatisfying – it will leave me looking for more in all the wrong places.

But this is difficult work. Giving yourself away day after day is also a recipe for burn out. This is a conundrum. Is it possible that we humans simply cannot live up to our full potential? Are we simply too frail and exhaustible to do it? Well, this is why Jesus says that our resources for this work must stem from our friendship with Him – this is our the vertical must always precede the horizontal. He says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love..."

You see, our task is not to muster up enough energy to give love away, but it is to let God's love overflow through me. And that's why our friendship with Jesus is so very important. But try to do it without remaining in Christ's love and you will simply exhaust yourself in the effort. You will become bitter and depleted – your friends will disappoint you – you will want to retreat from their endless need.

It's stunning, when you think about it, that Jesus calls us his friends. Just pause for a moment and take that in. The God of the universe, the one who tossed the stars and formed humanity from the dirt, the one who sits on the throne of thrones and holds all things together with the power of his world calls you his friend. Let us not pass over this too quickly.

But friendship is a funny thing. It's one relationship we so often think we can do without. Loneliness is said to be an epidemic in our time because so many people are going through life without close friendships. But we go without it at our peril.

The physical health consequences of poor or insufficient friendship connection includes a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia. And, a lack of social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%. And yet, in our time, fewer and fewer people can name a single close friend.

C.S. Lewis once said this: "The first and most obvious answer to why few value friendship is because few experience it. And the possibility of going through life without the experience [of friendship] is rooted in that fact which separates friendship so sharply from both the other loves. Friendship is – in a sense not at all derogatory to it – the least natural of loves;

the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary. It has least commerce with our nerves; there is nothing throaty about it nothing that quickens the pulse or turns you red and pale."

What Lewis is saying is that we think we can do without it. But we can't do without romantic relationships – no one would ever be born without romance. We can't live without family relationships – no one would ever be properly raised without a family. But friendship – it feels somehow optional.

And so, if you happen to be lucky enough to find someone you want to spend your time with – good for you! If you happen to meet someone who agrees with you, shares your sense of humour, who likes the same things you like, who can put up with your quirks and eccentricities – count yourself lucky!

But Jesus says friendship is not optional but essential. Friendship is part of God's design for the ordering of creation and friendship is part of God's plan for the redemption of creation. He says, "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."

We're now in God's inner circle. He has confided in us his hearts deepest yearnings, biggest dreams, and biggest plans for the future. We're Jesus' friends. And that changes the very nature of all of our other friendships. Our friendship with Jesus sets our other friendships up to flourish in a whole new way.

Because not only has Jesus shared himself with us, but now he is there for us. He is omnipresent – always and everywhere. He listens to us and he counsels us through his Spirit. He rejoices in our happiness and

grieves with us in our sorrow. Jesus is everything we need a friend to be.

But now, because of this unique friendship it changes all of our other friendships for the better. C.S. Lewis says that the basis of friendship is when you can say, "You too? I thought I was the only one." Christian friendship has a unique ability to cross class lines, temperaments, cultural differences, ethnic lines, sensibilities, and personal histories. Because the thing that draws us together isn't some common idea, interest, passion or experience but it's Jesus Christ himself.

Unlike just about every other basis for friendship, Christian friendship is where I can disagree with you on all kinds of things – really important things – but those things don't matter nearly as much as we thought, because we can agree on what God is up to in our lives and in our world. All you need to know about me is that I'm a person on whom water has been poured, words of promise spoken and now a single commandment has been mandated. Jesus says, "This is my command, "Love each other."

Tim Keller says it this way: "The picture that the Bible draws of spiritual friendship is remarkable. Christian friendship is not simply about going to concerts together or enjoying the same sporting events. It is the deep oneness that develops as two people journey together toward the same destiny, helping one another through the dangers and challenges along the way."

Keller goes on to say, "A Christian can become great friends with a non-Christian who, for example, shares her enthusiasm for an author. They read the author's books and meet to talk enthusiastically and joyfully about what they loved in the books. But that friendship is