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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Maundy Thursday
Thursday, April 1st, 2021

Sermon: Gethsemane (Jesus, Friend Forever)

Texts: Mark 14:27-51

Focus: Jesus suffered loneliness for us.

Function: That they would never doubt Christ's friendship and love for them.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "That I may be His own..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Friendship is hard to maintain. At each stage of my life I have had various friends: elementary school, high school, college, my "gap" year, seminary, my first parish, and now this congregation. And at each of these stages, I counted some friends particularly near and dear. Many were fun to hang out with but not close enough that I would bare my soul to them. Only a few were ever so close that I could not imagine my life without them. Only a few can I count closer than a brother.

And yet, as the years and miles grow, most of those friends have faded out of my life. I still keep close contact with my high school best friend, Brandon, whom I call every 3-4 weeks on a Saturday morning. My best friend from college, Mike, officiated at Lisa's and my wedding, and I was a groomsman in his, but sadly, we don't have much contact anymore. I had a really close circle of friends at my vicarage congregation in Des Moines, and at my first call, in Englewood, Colorado. But after I accepted a call to come here to Epiphany, it became difficult to keep up with those folks—and to transition from being their pastor to being "just" their friend. Most of my closest friends today are my old seminary buddies, especially Andrew, my seminary roommate and best man at my wedding.

When I consider the friends who have come and gone in my life, my heart is filled with sudden longing to see them again, to sit down over a cup of coffee or a cold beer and catch up. I feel a sense of what the Germans call *Sehnsucht*, a deep yearning for the people and places from my past. *Sehnsucht* is more than mere nostalgia, which is more sentimental than anything.

Nevertheless, sometimes God brings people into your life for a season, but there was still a reason for that friendship, no matter how brief your time together. Never neglect the memory of good friends: “Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend, and do not go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away” (Prov. 27:10).

Now it is true that I can boast of 643 friends on Facebook. But how many of those hundreds or thousands of Facebook “friends” are really true friends? I admit that I *know* all of them—or knew them once. (I never accept friend requests from people I don't know). Even then, many were what you might call “mere” acquaintances, although C.S. Lewis is quick to remind us that you have never met a “mere” mortal in all your life.¹

But if I were in dire straits, could I call up any of my Facebook friends at three o'clock in the morning? Would they loan me \$1,000—no questions asked? Would I attend their funerals? When's the last time I talked to them other than clicking the Like button on their Facebook page? For most of them, I couldn't even tell you the names of their spouses or children, or even what city they live in. And I'm not certain they could do the same for me. Facebook friends aren't the same as real friends. As King Solomon says, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24).

¹ C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory*.

Research by anthropologist Robin Dunbar shows that most people can only maintain a social network of about 150 people. Of those 150, about 50 are friends, 15 are “close friends,” and only 4 constitute what you might call an “intimate bond”—people whom you would trust in a crisis.

We see this truth borne out in the life of Jesus, our Savior. The size of the early church prior to Pentecost, which corresponded to the group of Jesus’ disciples—apart from the crowds—was “in all about 120” people (Acts 1:15), which is pretty near Dunbar’s Number. But Jesus’ group of close friends was only about 15 people: the twelve apostles plus Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Then there was his inner circle, the trio of Peter, James, and John, who alone were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and at the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 9:2; 5:37). They were also the three whom he asked to stay awake and pray with him during his distress in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:34-35). (*Aside: I wonder how many Facebook friends and Twitter followers Jesus had...*)

And it was in that very garden that Jesus lost most of his friends. Ordinarily, on Maundy Thursday, we remain in the upper room, where Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and instituted the Lord’s Supper. (In fact, the upper room is where our lectionary always leaves us.) But there was a lot more that happened on that Thursday night, including Jesus’ prayer, betrayal, and arrest in the garden and his kangaroo trial in the house of the high priest. So tonight I want us to tarry with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and to do what his own disciples could not (cf. Mark 14:37b).

That night in the Garden, Jesus warned the disciples: “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered’” (Mark 14:27).² Peter

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

protested that he would never fall away, even if all the others did. But Jesus told him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times” (v. 30). And in the courtyard of the high priest’s house, that is precisely what Peter did. In order to save his own skin, he denied Jesus three times. Peter, the spokesman of the apostles, one of the inner circle, the very rock upon which Christ would build his Church, declared with a curse that he never knew Jesus.

Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, betrayed Jesus with a kiss (Mark 14:44-45). (*Aside:* By the way, there is nothing homoerotic about this. In the Middle East even to this day, a kiss on the cheek is a common greeting between friends.) Judas, who had spent more than three years with Jesus, going where he went, eating what he ate, and sleeping where he slept, who had driven out demons and preached in Jesus’ name, who had witnessed more miracles than you can count, even he betrayed Jesus to his enemies.

And after the guards seized Jesus, the remaining disciples scattered to the four winds, just as he said they would. “And they all left him and fled” (Mark 14:50). Every single one of the Twelve either betrayed, abandoned, or denied Jesus. Every single one of his close friends let him down and left him bereft of counsel or aid in his darkest hour of need. And, in the end, even God abandoned him on the cross. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

Only five people who cared about Jesus actually stood beneath the cross to watch him die: his mother Mary, his Aunt Mary, Mary Magdalene, Aunt Salome, and John the apostle, who returned to his senses and eventually came back.

“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). Despite all his loneliness and loss, Jesus remained true to us. He

remained the closest and truest friend a person could ever have. As Jesus said in the upper room, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). The most powerful demonstration of love is to put it all on the line—even your own life—and die for your friends. And that’s what Jesus did for us. Despite our sin, rejection, denial, and betrayal, Christ died for us. Despite his angst, he went willingly to the cross because that’s why he came: to save and rescue his friends from sin, death, and the devil—and ultimately, to save us from ourselves.

When Jesus rose from the dead, he reunited with his friends. He forgave the apostles for running away and denying him. He even reinstated Peter in the ministry (John 21:15-19). And when, at life’s end, they breathed their last, he brought them home to him.

And so those we lose in this life are never truly lost to us if they remain in Christ. For if they are our fellow believers—our brothers and sisters in Christ—then we will see them again in heaven and the resurrection. Truly, Michael W. Smith had it right when he sang:

*And a friend’s a friend forever,
If the Lord’s the Lord of them.
And a friend will not say, “Never,”
‘Cause the welcome never ends.
Though it’s hard to let you go,
In the Father’s hands we know,
That a lifetime’s not too long
To live as friends.*

Dear friends in Christ, we are going to get to spend eternity together—all because our Friend Jesus suffered betrayal and abandonment and laid down his life on the cross for us. Jesus was forsaken on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But he will never forsake you. Truly, Jesus is the “friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24b). In the name of the Father and of the Son and ✠ of the Holy Spirit. Amen.