



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
March 17, 2019 Sermon

A Circle—and Circles—of Friends:

Luke 9:28-43

Friendship arises when two or more discover that they have in common some insight or interest . . . which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.”

In a perfect friendship . . . each member of the circle feels, in his secret heart, humbled before all the rest. Sometimes he wonders what he is doing there among his betters. He is lucky beyond his desert to be in such company. Especially when the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions . . .—C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.—1 Corinthians 12:27

Scripture Lesson:

Jesus had an inner circle. Or If you want to put a negative spin on it, he played favorites, namely, Peter, James and John.

“He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John”—That was when he went into the house to raise Jarius’s daughter from the dead.

“He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated”—That was on the night of his arrest when he went off to pray in the Garden at Gethsemane, sweating blood.

“Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them”—That was when the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. And Moses and Elijah, appeared in glory with him, speaking of his departure . . .

For our Scripture Lesson this morning, I’ll read Luke’s account of that transfiguration. But while Jesus did have an inner circle, I don’t think he played favorites. You can see this in the fact that Peter’s suggestion—*“let us make three dwellings here”*—was *not* followed. More on that later, but for now, listen for God’s word, Luke 9:28-36:

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory

and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Sermon:

What?—you too? I thought I was the only one.

That, according to C.S. Lewis, is how friendship begins. "I thought I was the only one." I thought I was the only one who saw *that*, who saw it *that* way; the only one who cared about that, or cared about things like that in general, who even knew that they existed. I thought I was the only one who cared—who even knew—that I existed.

"I do not call you servants any longer, but I call you friends. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends." Jesus says that to his disciples on the night of his arrest. During Lent, I plan to preach on those words in hopes that they will acquire a deeper meaning for us, and Easter, therefore, acquire a deeper joy.

What?—you too? I thought I was the only one. That is how friendship begins. And we need it; we need to know that we are not alone.

Hollywood knows this—knows how much we want, how much we need, friendship. They're called "buddy" movies, and no matter how different the settings, the subjects, or the storylines, they are all really about the same thing, friendship:

Dr. Don Shirley is a world-class African-American pianist, who is about to embark on a concert tour in the Deep South in 1962. In need of a driver and protection, Shirley recruits Tony Lip, a tough-talking bouncer from an Italian-American neighborhood in the Bronx. Despite their differences, the two men soon develop an unexpected bond of friendship . . . And there you have this year's Oscar winner for best picture, *Green Book*.

Which of course had its predecessor in *Driving Miss Daisy*, not to mention *Thelma and Louise* which had its predecessor in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*; and then there's *The Big Lebowski and Steel Magnolias*; and *Oceans 8 and Oceans 11*; and *A League of Their Own and The Bad News Bears*; and *Little Miss Sunshine and Planes, Trains and Automobiles*; and . . . Well, I could go on and on and on and on. There are thousands—tens of thousands—of these movies, and they're all the same.

Take two—or more—people, different people, very different people, people who would never come together otherwise, bring them together by some unlikely turn of events—and at first it looks like a bad joke: they can barely look at one another, much less see one another.

But then with time, as they travel together, as they have misadventures and adventures together, as they face challenges together, and it does take time—usually the movie runs about two hours—but

as they first judge but then come to understand one another, first fail to appreciate but then come to appreciate one another—with time, they become friends. And then there's always the big scene near the end—a scene where the characters have to choose between their new friends and friendship and what they would have wanted and chosen before that friendship. And then, once they've passed that test, there's the final triumphant, friendship-affirming scene at the end: Don Shirley goes to Tony Sipp's apartment in the Bronx and celebrates Christmas with him and all his family.

Yes, yes, yes: it's trite, predictable, cliched, formulaic, and we love it—love it; it's a story as old as human story-telling itself, and still we can't get enough of it. What all these movies tell us is that friendship triumphs in the end; no matter how great, no matter how insurmountable, our differences may seem, friendship triumphs in the end. Hollywood knows this—knows how much we want, how much we need, friendship; how much we need to know that we are not alone. It's true for the friendship of two people, but perhaps even more true for a group of friends, a circle of friends.

As you may know, C.S. Lewis himself was part of a circle of friends; they called themselves the Inklings, and it included JRR Tolkien (author of *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy), Owen Barfield, and others. They were academics, intellectuals, who shared the Christian faith, as well as a belief in the power of imagination, myth, and story-telling, and in the reality of things beyond our senses, when most of the academics, and the intellectual world, around them, did not; in fact, they viewed such things with contempt. "What?—you too? I thought I was the only one." Lewis must have had the Inklings in mind when he wrote this:

"In a perfect friendship . . . each member of the circle feels, in his secret heart, humbled before all the rest . . . He is lucky beyond his desert to be in such company. Especially when the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions . . ."

"In a perfect friendship." What I want to underline here is "the golden sessions": "when the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest, in all the others." In a circle of friends, at its best, we can receive the gifts that God is ready to give us: the gifts of our true selves, our humanity. In a circle of friends, at its best, we can each be uniquely, wonderfully, our best selves, while at the same time being united together, in fact, all the more united for all our variety and distinctiveness.

It can be golden—a circle of friends. And it can also be viscous. Because a group of so-called "friends" can also bring out the worst in each other, especially towards those outside the circle. Precisely because we do see and care about the same things when the rest of the world does not, precisely because that creates a bond of like-minded friends, it invites an indifference, even a contempt, for everyone outside the circle. Within their circle, the chivalric knights treated one another with the highest standards of valor, generosity, courtesy and honor; and outside their circle, they treated the peasants like dirt.

Lewis puts it this way: "the dangers are perfectly real. Friendship (as the ancients saw) can be a school of virtue; but also (as they did not see) a school of vice. It is ambivalent. It makes good men better and bad men worse." The group can "disdain as well as ignore those outside it." And when it does, it will have, in effect, turned itself into a "self-appointed aristocracy." When a circle degenerates into an us versus a them, "the transition from individual humility to group pride is very easy."

And the church has always struggled with this: from the first century to the twenty-first, from the smallest small-town church to the global church.

Which is why its so important that Jesus does not accept Peter's offer to make it a closed circle: "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Neither Jesus nor the voice from heaven will allow that: "This is my son the the chosen, listen to him." And what Jesus says is this: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

The circle is not closed, but open and ever-expanding, hence confirmation and baptism.

And yet at the same time, within that larger, open and ever-expanding circle, we need our smaller and, yes, closed circles. Jesus had Peter, James, and John. And we have our small groups (Neely, Ey, Some Westminster Men, Filia, Sessions, Lake, McGuire, *and* Weibel); *and* our Presby groups (Boomers, ETA, Genesis, Lambda, Nu, Omega, Philos, Spectrum, Tyrians, *and* Z); *and* the Bridge, Camping *and* Fiber Arts Groups; *and* PW and the PW circles (Circle 6, Coffee, Caring, and Crafts, Evening, Reading, Serendipity, *and* Sunshine) not to mention Church Partners, the Dinner Theater, the kitchen crew, *and* all of the Westminster choirs, *and* . . . Well, I could go on and on *and* on and on. "What?—you too? I thought I was the only one." That is how friendship begins. And we need it; we need to know that we are not alone.

And we *are* not alone: because there is one friend—one friendship—at the center of it all.

"I do not call you servants any longer, but I call you friends." Jesus says that to his disciples, to us, to the universe.

And because Jesus calls us his friends, we are called to be part of his body, the church.

In the church, at its best, we can receive the gifts that God is ready to give us, the gifts of our true selves, our humanity. In the church, at its best, we can each be uniquely, wonderfully, our best selves, while at the same time being united together, in fact, all the more united for all our variety and distinctiveness.

The church is at *its* best, and we are at *our* best, when we see the church as an expanding set of co-centric circles; some smaller and more fixed for our nurture; others larger and more expansive for our growth, but always, always with that friendship—his friendship—at the center.

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends." Friendship triumphs in the end; no matter how great, no matter how insurmountable our differences may seem, between us, between us and God, friendship triumphs in the end.

Josh, Sarah, Braden, Nessa, Will, Madeline, Anna, and Sarah—it's a gift to be a part of that circle with you. And to live in that friendship.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen