



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
March 31, 2019 Sermon

Friendship with God: Because of Our Differences

Philippians 2:1-11; Galatians 3:23-29

Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:

In a classroom or a scholarly commentary, a “gloss” is an explanation or definition of a word or passage in a text. Our first Scripture lesson, Philippians 2:1-11, is the Apostle Paul’s gloss on Jesus’ saying, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends.” This is especially true for verses 6-8. Listen now for God’s Word . . .

Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson:

When you first hear our Second Scripture Lesson—Paul’s letter to the Galatians 3:23-29—you might think that Paul is just being Paul again: talking about the religious law, and who is and is not a child of Abraham, and what not—things that don’t matter much to us anymore.

But if you listen closely, you’ll hear he’s talking about our differences, whatever our differences may be. Now, he’s *not* saying that the differences are bad in themselves. But he is saying that because of sin, those differences have become the source of separation and division.

But as Paul says repeatedly, Christ came to bear our sin for us, to take away the sin of the world. Therefore, in Christ those differences—insofar as they separate and divide us—no longer exist. Listen now for God’s Word . . .

Sermon:

They warn you in seminary, they warn you. The professors, that is, especially the older ones, the ones who spent years as pastors in churches before coming to teach, they warn you—about preaching on *that* subject. Oh, not in class, or even during the day, but late at night, when the waiters are putting up the chairs, and you have your feet up on the chair across from you, and last call has already been called, they warn you.

“Just be careful; if you’re going to preach on *that* subject, just be careful. First three words out your mouth, it’s like pushing a button, that’s all they hear; you’re either on their side or on the other side—and then they just don’t hear anything else you say. But then, after the sermon, you better believe *you* hear it . . .”

“But—but what if I’m balanced and Biblical, thoughtful and theological, surely they’ll listen then, won’t they?” That’s when you get the long, slow, gently head-shaking, ‘oh-you-are-young,-aren’t-you’ look.

“Look, people are going to get mad at you no matter what you say . . .”

“But—but don’t we have a responsibility to bring the faith to bear on the issues of our day? What about the prophets—Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, and all the rest—they did it!—they got people mad at them!” Same slow head-shaking, look. “Yeah, and look what happened to them: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets that are sent to you.’ Look, you do what you have to do, but just be careful, OK?” And the thing of it was, I thought I was being careful—a few weeks back, when I preached on *that* subject.

That subject by the way, just to come out and name it, that subject, by the way is . . . Well, I'm sure you guessed it, I'm sure many of you already knew it, I'm sure you *all* know it by now: That subject is . . . Yes, that's right, the Academy Awards, the Oscars, especially, the Academy Award for best picture. Oh, some people think it's politics, but I tell you that's nothing compared to the Academy Awards. They are the third rail of Presbyterian preaching—touch it, and you die. And the thing of it was, I thought I was being careful.

You may remember: it was just a few weeks back. I was preaching on friendship (as I am throughout Lent) specifically on Jesus calling his disciples—calling us—his friends. “I do not call you servants any longer,” he says on the night of his arrest, “but I call you friends.” And later that same night, he says: “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for his friends.” That's what I was—and am—preaching on.

And I wanted to show that friendship isn't just for kids, isn't just a garnish to life, a diversion to fill up our spare time. No, I wanted to show that friendship is essential for our happiness, for who we are, for our humanity, for our becoming our true, best, God-given selves.

So early in the sermon, I appealed to Hollywood, in particular, to the recurring proliferation and enduring, seemingly eternal, popularity of so-called “buddy movies.” You know, movies that—no matter how different the settings, circumstances, and characters—have essentially the same story line: Take two—or more—people, different people, very different people, people who would never come together in ordinary circumstances, bring them together by some unlikely turn of events, and then, with time, as they travel together, as they have misadventures and adventures together, as they face challenges together, they become friends.

And so I appealed to the movie, *Green Book*, where Dr. Don Shirley, a world-class African-American pianist about to embark on a concert tour in the Deep South in 1962, hires “Tony Lip,” a tough-guy bouncer from an Italian-American neighborhood in the Bronx, both as a driver and as a bodyguard, really, as his muscle. And then—and this is the movie: Despite their differences, as they travel together through the Deep South, and face all the challenges, and have all the adventures, the two become friends.

I mean, it is a **classic** buddy movie that had, just a few weeks earlier, won the Oscar for best picture: as sermon illustrations go, it was a gimme. And the thing of it was, I thought I **was** being careful. I mean, I never said I liked the movie, or that it was a good movie; or that it deserved to win best picture. All I said was that it followed—indeed, exemplified—the formula, and that its popularity—like the popularity of so, so many buddy movies before it—showed how much we value friendship and how much want to see it triumph in the end. And then I moved on to the rest of the sermon—and I may have been the only one who did. Because, when I got back there, after the service, to greet people, I got this: “So you liked that movie, too?! (“Uh, I never said I liked it.”) That's great: I loved it; I couldn't believe all those critics carping about it.”

But I also got this: “So you liked, that movie, did you? (“Uh, I never said I liked it.”). Uh-huh: I'm going to send you a few reviews.”

And Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, the emails came rolling in. And when I clicked on the links to read the reviews, here's the main complaint I found: The movie is feel-good escapism. Now, at first maybe I got a little defensive, I mean, “feel-good escapism,” that's true for only about . . . what? . . . 90% of Hollywood movies? How am I supposed to get sermon illustrations if I can't use feel-good escapist movies? And by the way, I never said I liked the movie!

But then, as I read on (trying not to get defensive), I found something interesting in this complaint: namely, that, in *Green Book*, as in so many other buddy movies, the friendship must overcome larg-

er social inequalities—legal, racial, gender, educational, economic inequalities—and yet by the end of movie, all those inequalities are still in place—certainly in our world, but also in the world of the movie, and even in the friendship itself. Here’s what one critic said (I put it on the front of your bulletins): *Green Book’s tagline is “based on a true friendship.” But the transactional nature of the friendship [that is, the fact that Don Shirley pays Tony Lip] makes it seem less true than sponsored. . . .*

And so because it is not a true friendship, because the inequalities have not been overcome, (racial, economic and educational inequalities in *Green Book*, inequalities that cut both ways, by the way), the seeming triumph of friendship in the end—the one we like so much—is an illusion, nothing more than feel-good escapism. The same critic writes: “The kind of closure the movie offers is like a drug.”

And I have to say, agree with the him or no, the critic raises an interesting question: do friends have to be equal to be friends? On the one hand, Jesus says, “I don’t call you servants any longer, I call you friends.” Which, sure, sounds like equality. But on the other hand, at the very same time he’s saying that, he says this: “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Which sure doesn’t sound like equality.

So do friends have to be equal to be friends? It’s a question with a long and distinguished history. Aristotle, writing some 300 years before Jesus, and reflecting the high value the ancient world in general and the ancient moralists in particular put on friendship, devotes two whole chapters to it in his *Ethics*. He says that, in general, friendship is based on equality: “like to like,” “birds of a feather,” and all that. But (he says) there can be a kind of friendship between unequals, for example, between teachers and their students, parents and their children, mentors and their mentees, masters and their servants. But this kind of friendship requires some adjustment in the giving and receiving.

In a garden-variety friendship, one based on equality, each friend gives and receives the same thing: affection, and each wants the same thing: the good of the other for the other’s own sake. But in a friendship of unequals, the affection tends more towards veneration and even reverence (of the lesser towards the greater) and guidance and support (of the greater towards the lesser). And while each wants the good of the other for the other’s own sake, the superior partner, because of his or her superiority, is far more able to bring that about.

But even here, there are limiting cases (Aristotle says): cases where the inequality is just too great for any kind of friendship to develop. As between a king and a peasant, or in the extreme case, between God and a human being. No friendship is possible there, Aristotle says, between God and a human being—the inequality is just too great for friendship.

“Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” “I don’t call you servants any longer, Jesus said, I call you friends.” This, Aristotle, for all his genius, could not conceive: that God would humble himself to become friends with us.

And this inequality—the one that Jesus overcomes—is not a mere inequality of status, that is between God being God and our being human, between Creator and creature, between Sustainer and sustained. No, the inequality is far greater and far more deadly than that: It is an inequality of disobedience, trespass, fault, and offense. It is an inequality of sin. Paul writes this: *There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness.*

Our sin has separated us from God, from the world, from one another, and from ourselves. That inequality brought about by sin—Jesus bridges for us by becoming like us. Again, Paul: *For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

God made him to be sin who knew no sin. The wages of sin are death: Greater love has no one than this: to lay down his life for us. In Jesus Christ, God became like us, paying the price of sin, which is death, without himself having sinned, so that we might become like God—righteous. So that we might become friends with God on the basis of equality.

That is truly wanting the good of the other for the other's own sake. A good that, because of God's superiority, only God could bring about. And that friendship between us and God—a friendship essential for our happiness, for who we are, for our humanity, for our becoming our true, best, God-given selves—that friendship is real—nothing is more real—but it is not yet fully realized. We have not yet seen it triumph in our world; the kingdom of heaven is not yet fully and finally here.

Which is why we go to the movies. To catch a glimpse—a sneak preview, if you will—of the kingdom of heaven. And I tell, you that final scene in *Green Book*—when all of Tony's extended family is at their place in Bronx celebrating Christmas, and the pawn broker and his wife show up unexpectedly, and then Don Shirley shows up, and then Tony hugs him, and then Tony's wife hugs him, and then he comes in and they all welcome him, and then they begin to eat and drink and make merry—I tell you, that is what the kingdom of heaven will look like: they will come from north and south and east and west to sit at table in the kingdom of God. So yeah, I liked the movie, all right? You gotta a problem with that? (Sorry, I just had to channel my inner Tony Lip.)

Of course, the kingdom of God is not fully here in our world yet. That's why Jesus says to his disciples and to us: "You are my friends if you do what I command you, and this is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you."

"Love one another as I have loved you." In other words: don't let your differences divide and separate you, and where they already have divided and separated you, work for reconciliation, as I have reconciled you, and all of creation, to God.

Now of course, if all we did to bring about such reconciliation was go to the movies, then the movies would be feel-good escapism. But that's not all we do. We are part of Christ's body, the church. And that means we extend ourselves—we show kindness—across differences for the reconciliation of the world. You may even remember, a couple weeks back, I finished my sermon saying this:

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 Jesus' friendship at the center.

You may remember that, but you probably don't, because that was the sermon I started out talking about *Green Book*. (They warned me.) And yes, I know: it's kind of an ironic reversal, historically speaking: I mean, here you have the preacher in his pulpit, recommending a movie as relatively harmless fun (and—who knows?—it might even be helpful, it might even give us a glimpse of, not to mention some inspiration towards, the kingdom of heaven (in any case, it's certainly better than watching cable news for two hours)), whereas here on the front of your bulletins you have the secular movie critic writing for the leading secular newspaper of our day who will allow no such enjoyment, insisting that we keep our sin and the world's sinfulness ever before our eyes.

60, 70, 80, 90 years ago, when Hollywood first came onto the American scene, it was not that way, to put it mildly. Somewhere, H.L. Mencken and William Jennings Bryan, those old antagonists, the secular newspaperman and the radio preacher, have their feet up on the chairs in front of them, and they're laughing at all this. And praise God for it. Because such reconciliation, such friendship, and such laughter, is the stuff of heaven.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ—our Lord and our friend.
Amen.