**The Friends We Make**

**Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, John 4:4-15**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

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I absolutely love this time of year. I love autumn – the cooler nights, changing leaves, bright blue skies, but what I really love are these first weeks of a new school year. Even though I’m not in school and my daughter started her classes in mid-August, there is something about the weeks after Labor Day that just feel full of potential. There are so many new possibilities – new things to learn, classes to take, and, of course, people to meet.

This is a prime time for making friends since, for many of us, the start of a new school year will bring new people into our lives. We may meet new colleagues at work or potential friends who are the parents of our children’s new friends. Of course, that is true here at church, as well. These early weeks of fall bring opportunities to meet new friends in adult education classes, in the choir, through our children’s activities, or volunteering in one of our education or outreach programs.

As adults, we often let our social circles become increasingly narrow. The demands of work and obligations of family life leave us limited time for developing friendships or spending time on self-care. But, we know the value of friendship in our lives is undeniable. Friends keep us from feeling lonely, give us a sense of belonging, boost our happiness and self-worth, help us cope with trauma, encourage us to take better care of ourselves. According to the Mayo Clinic, “Adults with strong social support have a reduced risk of many significant health problems, including depression, high blood pressure and an unhealthy body mass index (BMI). Studies have even found that older adults with a rich social life are likely to live longer than their peers with fewer connections.”

But, you might be wondering, what does that have to do with church or with my life of faith? We’ve just finished a fun sermon series about the Gospel seen through the eyes of Mister Rogers. Of course, that meant we spent a lot of time talking about neighbors. My contention is that often it is within the community we call church that neighbors become friends. And that, in fact, the friends we make through our communal life together here have the potential to be friends for the rest of our lives. Church is a safe place where we can make friends who see us through the greatest crises, friends who create sacred space where we can be vulnerable, and friends who challenge us to grow in our love for God, our acceptance of others, and our service to the world. So, at this start of a new program year, a new phase in the life of our church, and for many perhaps a new phase of life personally, we’re going to spend a few weeks exploring faith and friendship.

Aristotle wrote that it is friendship that holds a city together, and the same can certainly be said of the church. The wise author of the book of Ecclesiastes, who struggles with his fear that all life is vanity and lacks purpose and value, recognizes the importance of relationship. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.  For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone?”

And Jesus clearly understood how important it would be for the disciples to feel closely connected to each other in the days and months after his death. At the Last Supper, he instituted the practice of Communion as a way to connect the community of disciples. Whenever we take Communion, we speak of the church as made up of many different people, people who have diverse needs and gifts, but who are bound together by faith into one body, the body of Christ.

I firmly believe that the health of this church, of this community, is dependent on the relationships, the friendships that we make here. That’s why I am supportive of the changes our children’s ministry team is making in order to create space for our children to build lasting relationships in the church. It’s why I think it’s so important for us to have opportunities for people to meet through adult faith formation classes and service projects and worshiping and studying together. We have small groups in our congregation that have been together for more than twenty years. They’ve raised their children together. They’ve supported each other through the death of parents and the emptying of their nests, through cancer and injuries, through crises of faith and periods of tremendous doubt.

Those relationships weave the fabric of this community and create sustenance and hope for each of us individually. So, what are you going to do this year in your church life to grow in friendship and love? And, are you willing to step outside of your comfort zone to do it? Because, that is what we who follow Jesus are called to do.

The story we just heard about the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is a prime example. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” the woman says to Jesus. It’s an unlikely scenario in so many ways. That a Jew would even speak to a Samaritan was almost unheard of. The two groups had centuries’ worth of political and religious animosity between them. Plus, this is a man speaking to a woman outside his family when they are alone. Another breach of social contract.

Yet, this is the way of Jesus. He really doesn’t seem to care about social or religious or political difference. He simply extends the hand of friendship to those whom he meets.

A couple of weeks ago, the United States lost an important voice in American political dialogue. John McCain passed away after a difficult battle with brain cancer. In the days and weeks since his death, one thing that has surfaced about him is that he is one of few politicians who seem to be admired and respected by people across the continuum of political views.

I don’t know how many times since his death I have heard or seen the words, “I didn’t agree with him on many issues, but I respected him and I will miss him.”

Much of what was admirable about John McCain came through in his farewell letter to the American people. He spoke about the causes of our country - liberty, equal justice, and respect for the dignity of all people – and went on to say, “We weaken our greatness when we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe. We weaken it when we hide behind walls, rather than tear them down, when we doubt the power of our ideals, rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been.”

McCain is naming our human tendency to stay within small groups of people with whom we share the same ideals or interests or geographic location or political views and then to alienate groups who are different.

In his conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus shows us that for him, and, therefore, for those of us who choose to model our lives after his, there is no place for these “tribal rivalries”. Not when the great commandment is to love God and to love neighbor.

To associate with like-minded people is natural and inevitable for us as social creatures, but our faith in Jesus calls us to also make friends outside of those small groups, outside our comfort zones.

So, who are your friends? In what groups do you travel? You may have a group of friends from work or a group from a club you belong to or a group you know through your children or a group that you play a sport with. We all have different groups. And the same is here at church, too. You may have a small fellowship group that has met for years or a group you know from singing in choir or a group you met when you all took Disciple together.

Those small groups of friendships are so important. They are what make a large church feel small. They are what sustain and motivate you, bring you to church, make you feel you belong. But, they can also be what alienate people who are new to our church or community. They may give our church the feeling of being made up of lots of closed circles that are hard for anyone different to enter. They may keep our congregation more homogenous than we really want it to be.

How can you break out of your comfort zone? How can you make a point – today, this week, this month and year – of approaching someone you don’t know and starting a conversation? How can you remind yourself to look for the new person at Connections or sitting alone in the sanctuary before worship? How can you challenge yourself to strike up a conversation with someone you know has different beliefs than yours? How can you urge yourself to stop and talk to the homeless guy on the sidewalk, the person leaving the tattoo parlor across the street, the person who has a disability, the guy you work with who seems so standoffish?

School has started, the nights are cooler, and soon the leaves will change to red and gold. It is the time of new beginnings and new friendships. It is a time for us to be a church that welcomes whoever enters our doors and helps them find friends. Screw up your courage. Go out to our Fall Festival and make a new friend, open up your circle of friends, and make the circle a little wider.

Thanks be to God. Amen.