**The Friends We Bring**

**John 1:35-46**

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As I begin, we’re going to do a little exercise. I’d like you to bring to mind ten of your friends or acquaintances. It can be any ten people – including family members, but let’s exclude young children. If you have a pen or pencil handy, write down their names on the front of your bulletin. I won’t be offended if you’re writing while I’m talking – in fact, I’ll be glad. As you think about each one of these ten people, consider this – what do you know about their religious life? Do you know if they practice a religion? If so, which one? If not, why not? If they identify as Christian, do they go to church? Do they have a church? Have they, perhaps, been offended or hurt by church? And of these ten people, how many have you talked to about things you’ve done at church or why you go to church or why you like this church?

Now, let’s compare your ten people with a random ten people in America today. According to recent Gallup and Pew polls, about 75% of Americans identify as Christian. Now, given the diversity of Ann Arbor, that number could certainly be a bit lower, but it’s a starting point. About six percent of Americans identify with a religion other than Christianity – so, I guess that’s one-half of one of your friends. And then 21% don’t identify with any religion at all.

If your ten people are typical, then, 7.5 of them identify as Christian. However, only 2.3 go to church once a month or more. That’s 5.2 out of ten people who could potentially find a church home here. Plus, there are another two out of ten who don’t identify with religion but might if they found a faith they could embrace. So, that would say that theoretically seven out of the ten people on your list are people you might invite to church.

Hold that thought – and consider a few different questions about these ten people you know. How many of them have gone through some kind of personal crisis in the time you have known them? How many have children? How many have taken on something new to make them a better person? And, finally, how many have in some way, direct or indirect, expressed a desire to know God better or feel closer to God?

Here’s why I ask. In the Pew study, of the 31% who do attend church at least once per month, the most common reasons they gave were to feel closer to God, to give their children moral grounding, to make themselves better people, and to find comfort during times of crisis.

So, how do your ten people compare? I tried to do this myself, and I wrote down the names of the first ten people I thought of. I guess I should have realized my numbers might be skewed since four of the ten are clergy! Despite that, I was surprised to find that my ten people lined up pretty closely with the national averages, and that means that there are five people on my list who I could, theoretically, invite to church.

Last week, we had a wonderful start to our new program year. The church was full of energy and excitement! Worship was fun and joyful and, despite moving inside at the last minute, our Fall Festival was packed and filled with laughter and hugs. We also started a short sermon series on faith and friendship. Last week, we talked about making new friends just in time for you to go to the Fall Festival and meet some new people. Did anyone meet someone they didn’t know before last week? Now, this week we’re changing topics from the Friends We Make to the Friends We Bring, and, not surprisingly, I’m going to encourage you to regularly invite friends to come to church with you.

Now, before I go any further, a word of disclaimer…I am an introvert. A lot of people don’t believe it, but it’s true. I am a true introvert – so much so that on the Meyers-Briggs scale I come out like 90% introvert and 10% extrovert. It doesn’t mean I don’t like people – not at all. I love people and I love my job working with people. But, at the end of the day, I need time alone to recharge my batteries, get grounded, and feel ready to face another day. Extroverts get their energy from other people; introverts get energy from time alone. Now only that - I’m also a people-pleaser. I want everyone to feel comfortable all the time; I don’t like to put people on the spot.

So, all of that means I’m really not very good at inviting people to church. If this topic, this idea of inviting a friend to church makes you uncomfortable – and being the people-pleaser I am, I really don’t want you to feel uncomfortable – but if this makes you uncomfortable, I’m right there with you. I’m a good, liberal, Protestant, Midwestern introvert and the whole idea of evangelism makes me very, very anxious.

BUT – even greater than my introversion, even greater than my anxiety, even greater than my desire not to make people uncomfortable, is my commitment to love.

When Jesus began his ministry some 2000 years ago, life was pretty miserable for the majority of people in his homeland. The nation of Judah had been taken over by one group after another – the Babylonians, the Persians, and, at the time Jesus lived, the Romans. Jews lived day to day under the threat of Roman soldiers but also under the painfully stringent laws of the Torah as interpreted by the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Many, many people lived in poverty; many were in debt; and even those with some income, had to pay so much in taxes to the temple that they were left empty-handed. Begging was as commonplace as illness. Crucifixion a means of the empire frightening the Jews into cooperation.

For centuries, as they were overrun by one empire after another, the Jews prayed for the Messiah who would come to save them. They expected a warrior – someone sent to them by God who would raise an army and overthrow their enemies so the people could be free.

So, when Jesus began to call his disciples, he was a far cry from the Messiah they were expecting. He was a carpenter’s son from Nazareth (can anything good come from Nazareth?). But, he called to the disciples – come and see, follow me. And when they did, they discovered a Messiah who did not rescue them with an army and military might but a savior who gave them hope by teaching them love. He helped them to find their own value, their worth. He healed them in body; he healed them in spirit. He helped them find meaning and purpose in their lives. He taught them about God and what it means to live the life God calls us to – a life of wholeness and hope.

After Jesus died, after the shock and joy of his resurrection, those disciples gathered to create a community that would continue to live and teach the way of love. And that community was the first church. We have inherited that church, that way, that hope.

Every day, our news is full of despair. Children are dying of starvation or the lack of clean water. Teenagers are being shot by gangs in the streets. Racial tensions flare. Doctors abuse gymnasts. Whole communities are flooded by rains from a hurricane. We hear one piece of bad and painful news after another. So much so that it becomes overwhelming. You turn off the radio. Stick your fingers in your ears.

But that’s why we come here. Here in these walls, we are creating a different kind of community. A community grounded in love, in the acceptance of all people, in the hope born of treating each other with the same respect and openness that Jesus demonstrated with prostitutes and politicians, lepers and beggars.

Over the last fifty years or so, the Christian church has gotten a bad rap. I think there are a lot of people out there who look at church with the same attitude as Nathanael looked at Nazareth. Can anything good come out of church? The answer is, emphatically, yes! But, it’s up to us to name what it is. To have on the tip of our tongues why we love this church, why we think our friends might love it, too.

For me, the answer is hope. In these days of fake news and hate crimes, hurricanes and poverty, this is a place filled with love – a place where people work together to teach children compassion, to feed the hungry, to help the homeless. This is a place where all people are welcome and accepted as they are. This is a place where people who are hurting find support and friendship. This place is a crucible for love. It grows here, and then reaches out from here into the world.

This place has something to offer your friends who are searching for something more in their lives, the neighbors who have small kids and want to raise them to be compassionate, your co-worker who wants to serve his community, the friend who just lost her mother or his job or their hope. This place offers something completely counter-cultural – a community grounded first and foremost in love. Not competition, not politics, not ego-soothing, not money. Love. And from love, hope is born.

I think we’ve got a really good thing going on here at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, and I believe that a lot of people are looking for the kind of community we are but they don’t know it. They are only going to find out if we tell them.

Jesus challenged his disciples to go into the world and invite others to come and see. So, I’m going to challenge you. I’ve never done something like this before. But, I want to see our world become a better place and I believe that this church offers a way to get there. Over the course of the coming program year, between now and June, I committing to inviting at least five people to our church and I’m going to ask you to do the same. Each time I do it, I’ll let you know so you know I’m keeping my end of the deal. I hope that each time you do, you’ll introduce me to whomever you invite.

This won’t be easy for some of us. The easiest way is to know what it is you love about this church and then tell someone about it. If it helps, we’ve got these little cards sitting outside the sanctuary doors. Grab a pile, put them in your wallet or purse, hand them to the person you’re inviting and tell them, this, this place, this place offers an alternative to all the despair out there – the is a place of hope, a crucible of love. Invite them to come and see. May it be so. Amen.