



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Friends**  
Ed Sutter

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This sermon falls in the middle of a series from The Bridge Contemporary service called, “For All the Saints,” which centered around a theme of recognizing people of faith that have influenced our faith and the ways in which we relate to Christ.

As I’ve listened to others share about the insight and wisdom they’ve learned from those that have walked the path of faith before them, I began to think about the impact of those who walk with us in our daily lives. While it is unlikely that very many of us have read the works of St. Francis, or Columba or Martin Luther – and it is a certainty that we haven’t met these people, it is nearly universally true that we are impacted by the friends, family and community that we keep on a day to day basis.

While people most often use the adage, “it takes a village” in reference to children, the saying is applicable to all of us. The metaphoric villages we spend our time in shape us both intentionally and unconsciously. And these villages take on many forms throughout our lives. As children our village begins with our immediate family or a few close friends, then expands into our schools, our workplaces and our communities and neighborhoods; each of these groups shapes us.

To be honest, its total coincidence, perhaps providence, that this message lands on the very week that families from all over the country will gather together around dining room tables to share a meal with one another. Thanksgiving week is well known for being the busiest travel week of the year for this very reason: we choose to be close to our family and friends.

Though some of us may not need any extra help, if you're looking to shake up the conversation around your dinner table, ask the question that Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" In other words, "When I get in the car to go home and you're settling in for the night, what will you say about me?" Will your friends and family say, "What a lovely person." "What a joy to be around." "I agree with all of the points he made at dinner." "I'm glad she shared her opinion." Or will they say something else?

We all know this experience. We've wondered what people say and think about us, and we've taken part in conversations about others; and because we know what it's like to have some of these slightly abrasive relationships, when given the option, we tend to choose relationships that are less abrasive, people that see the world the way that we do, people that think and act and talk and dress and look the way that we do. We usually call these people friends.

One of the reasons we surround ourselves with these people is that there is an inherent comfort in what we already know. We feel at ease when it is assumed and understood that we "fit in." A second reason we surround ourselves with these folks is that we want to know that if we were to ever ask the question, "Who do you say I am?" We'll get answers like, "You're a good friend," "A hard worker," and, "A caring neighbor." We would never want to hear answers like, "You're close-minded" "You're shallow," or, "You're selfish." So in order to avoid that second category of answers we avoid the people that may think those things. In this way, our friends and the metaphoric, and sometimes literal, "villages" that we choose to live in are a reflection of our priorities.

I recognize that it is possible at this point to think something like, “Well, if we’re already so similar, then how would they influence me?” But when we truly think about it, we all know that is of course not true – our closest connections can have tremendous influence on our lives, and that influence can swing in a few different directions. The first is reflected in the Psalm 55, which we read earlier; any pain inflicted on us by someone from our inner circle of relationships is likely to be far greater than the pain inflicted by a more peripheral acquaintance. Just as the psalm says, “If it were an enemy insulting me, I could endure it, but it is you...a close friend, a companion.” The pain is greater from someone within our closest communities.

A second way that our friends can influence us is into a rock solid sense of complacency. If I look around and the vast majority of people in my life think and act and live just like I do – I’d be inclined to think that I must be doing something right; there would be very little motivation to change or grow. While this idea may seem comforting, this pattern can lead to stagnation, which leads to sort of atrophy of the soul. Without growth, change, and challenge we begin to shrivel and weaken. So often this happens covertly, a little at a time, even as we think things are “just fine.”

There’s another way that our friends and our close community can influence us, and I think that it is perhaps the most beautiful way, though it may also be the hardest to achieve. As is so often the case, there is wisdom in looking to the middle ground of the two situations we have discussed. While we are unlikely to surround ourselves with people who consistently think ill of us, and there are certain pitfalls to living life with those who nearly always agree with us, a community of friends that can both support and disagree, that can both challenge and uphold one another

creates an environment that fosters the strength and growth of each member. This takes awareness, trust and vulnerability.

We need to be the friends that can step out on a limb to challenge a friend that we have seen fall from their values – and we need to be the friends that can accept the challenges that are given to us. In general we tend to be much better at advising others to be challenged than we are at receiving challenge. When Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am?” he accepts that challenge “When I walk out of this room, when we’re not face to face – who am I to you?”

We must be aware of the influence our friends and our community have on us and we must uphold our responsibility to enter into relationships that challenge us to grow, to avoid stagnation and complacency, and to move ever closer to the people that God has called us to be.

We find community and relationship everywhere we go, so perhaps we need to ask ourselves, “What does my closest community say about who I am?” “What does the company I keep teach me about myself?” And, “Where can I find people that I can trust, that I can be open with, and that will challenge me to be closer my God and Savior?”

Let us become a community that isn’t afraid to ask, or answer the question, “Who do you say I am?”



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