



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

July 10, 2016

Friends
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

Friends

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2016 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: July 18, 2016

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (John 15:14-15).

Few things in life are more precious than friendship.

The Bible has lots of stories about friends, probably because it's such a central part of our life together. One of the most compelling stories is when David meets Jonathan, the son of King Saul, while they're both young men. They become fast friends, and we're told that "Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul." Our best friends feel like they're part of us. It's as if they help to complete the person that we are.

Later, when David is being hunted by Saul because the king is jealous and wants to kill him, some men come and find David in hiding. He tells them, "If you have come to me in friendship, to help me, then my heart will be knit to you; but if you have come to betray me to my adversaries, though my hands have done no wrong, then may the God of our ancestors see and give judgment." "My heart will be knit to you if you help me," David says. That's what happens in true friendship. Hearts get knit together. But the possibility of friendship comes with vulnerability too.

The Bible knows how precious friendship is, but also how it can expose our soul. In fact, the same vulnerability that makes us cautious and guarded with strangers is part of what makes real friendship so precious. The security and freedom we find in a confidante is a wonderful gift. "I can tell

him anything and I know he'll keep it to himself," we say of someone we really trust. To be known fully and safely in friendship is an almost sacred thing, and to be privileged to know another person deeply is a sacred trust, not to be taken lightly.

I say "sacred" because people of deep faith know something like this in their relationship with God. So David, years later when he becomes king of Israel himself, says in the 139th psalm, according to tradition: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me.... You are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely." That sounds like an intimate friendship, the kind where one person can finish the other's sentences, and you come to trust your friend completely.

There are all sorts of proverbs about friends in the Bible. "A friend loves at all times" one of them says, reminding us that anyone who does not love consistently is not much of a friend. "The righteous give good advice to friends" another proverb says, because friends want what's best for each other, and one of the responsibilities of friendship is to watch out for each other's blind spots. "Some people play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than the nearest kin," still another proverb says. And the Bible knows the difference between true friendship and simple expedience. So "Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless" one proverb observes rather sadly, and another adds "Everyone is a friend to the giver of gifts."

If few things in life are sweeter than friendship, nothing is more bitter than a friend's betrayal. A true friend will never give up your secrets for the paltry pleasure of a little gossip. A friend will not "throw you under the bus," as people say today. And a friend won't hand you over to your

enemies. One of the most poignant lines in all of literature comes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, when Caesar is assassinated by a group of hostile senators. As daggers are drawn, Caesar sees his young friend and protégé Brutus among the assassins, and he calls out, *Et tu, Brute?* "And you, Brutus?" Ancient historians tell the tale in different ways, including one report that Caesar may have said in Greek, *Kai su, teknon?* "And you, child?" as though Caesar thought of Brutus as a son.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is the book of Job. At one level, of course, the story is about the problem of suffering: If God is good, why is there so much suffering in the world, and especially so much innocent suffering? At another level, though, the story of Job is also about friendship.

Terrible things happen to Job. He's a very rich man, but all his wealth is stolen. He has ten children, but all of his children perish. And then, as if those losses were not awful enough, his body breaks out in horrible sores from head to foot. All of this happens in the very beginning of the story.

When Job's three friends hear the news they come and try to comfort him. They see Job from a distance but they don't even recognize him, since the sores and the suffering have taken such a toll on his appearance. The friends draw near, and as the narrator tells us, "They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." That's the best thing Job's friends do for him: just sitting there in silence, practicing the ministry of presence. For a whole week, they just stay nearby, so their friend won't have to suffer alone.

Then Job begins his lament: “Let the day perish in which I was born” Now Job’s friends hear him pour out his heart, and his pain is more than they can bear. For most of the rest of the book they try to offer up explanations to account for Job’s suffering. Among other things, they imply that Job must have done something bad to deserve all this, though we’re told at the outset that Job has done nothing wrong. Some people would rather find someone to blame, even the victim himself, than face the fear of apparently random, undeserved suffering. So Job’s friends seek their own comfort with plausible but false explanations that only compound the poor man’s pain.

Insofar as the story of Job is about friendship, his best friend turns out to be God, who hears Job’s lament, and reminds Job that God is God and he is not, and ultimately restores his fortunes in the end. God tells Job to pray for his misguided friends and God will forgive them for being such terrible counselors. Those of us who hear the story are reminded that friendship is mostly about being there, and being supportive. Sometimes we know what to say, and the wise person will say things gently and well, in ways that are truly comforting. But often there really isn’t much to be said that’s helpful, except “I’m here, and I will be with you, and I’ll pray for you, and you won’t have to carry your burden alone.”

Wise friends know when to speak and when to be just a quiet, caring presence. And friends stand by their friends, even when times are hard. Especially when times are hard.

Our whole nation is reeling again this week in the wake of another round of violence. This time the conflict is woven all through with the awful legacy of race relations in America. Our African American friends are so tired and

frustrated by what seems to be a never-ending series of black people being killed, often by others in their own community but sometimes by the very people who are supposed to preserve and protect public safety.

Black lives matter, they say, and of course they're right. Black lives do matter. And the frustration we're seeing these days is the result not only of a terrible string of individual incidents but an entire history that began with slavery and passed through formal segregation and continues today with discrimination in a myriad of subtle and not-so-subtle ways that most white people never even see. These are our friends and fellow Christians who are suffering, and we want to stand by our friends, and do what we can to be supportive and to make things better.

At the same time, of course, nothing justifies the terrible violence against those police officers in Dallas who were killed last week, or any other officers who risk their lives day after day, sincerely wanting to serve and protect all of our citizens. Blue lives matter too, as our friends in law enforcement are also crying out this week.

The truth is that all lives matter, and people of good will understand this in ways that are not dismissive of the suffering of any particular individual or group of individuals. We need to stop this business of dismissing one person's pain by pointing to the pain of someone else, as if the first person's suffering didn't really matter. Anyone who suffers deserves our compassion—and not only our compassion, but our supportive presence in the midst of their suffering, and our best efforts to do what we can to take away the causes of that suffering. These are just the things that good friends do for one another.

If all we had to rely on in this world was one another's friendship, things would be much harder than they already are. But the truth is, beyond our earthly friendships we have this extraordinary offer of friendship with God. As the psalmist says, "The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them." The fear of the Lord, as we understand it, is not like the things that frighten us in this life, but the awesome recognition that God is God, and we are absolutely and utterly dependent upon God, but God is absolutely and utterly dependable.

For those who know God personally, there is a kind of friendship with the Almighty that preserves and protects and sustains us in the midst of everything else. Sometimes our human friends let us down, but even when they are entirely faithful, there is a limit to what we can do for one another. There are some things only God can do. Only God can create in us a clean heart and put a new and right spirit within us. Only God can forgive our sins and save our souls in the end, and the friends of God are those who rely on these essential truths.

Jesus says, "I don't call you servants any longer. I call you friends. You are my friends if you keep my commandments." God becomes like us in Christ so that we can see God's friendship more clearly. We will be friends of Jesus, and therefore friends of God, if we do what Jesus tells us to do. As we say so often here, we know what that means: to love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Our neighbors become our friends as we get to know them and learn to love them. And good friends stand by one another. We know what that looks like, because Jesus stands by us. He does not give us up to our sin, or leave us alone in any of our suffering, whether that suffering is

innocent and undeserved or we bring it upon ourselves. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus loves us, and calls us his friends, and he would have us be good and faithful friends to one another.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org