

INTRO & CONNECTION to SERIES

We have spent the last several weeks looking at [Faith Practices](#). Spiritual Disciplines, if you will, of our faith family throughout history used to remain steadfast and joyous in the transformative and freeing faith in the Lordship and living presence of Jesus Christ regardless of our internal conflicts and external circumstances. These Faith Practices help us to

cultivate grace; a way of being and living in relation to God's character, purposes and context that we come to know in our union with Jesus.

Training us to participate in the fostering of an environment in which we and others can grow up into the fullness of our humanity within God's Story. We have been referring to a full life in God's Story as living in a Garden, not simply the 'natural' growth of vegetation; but, a carefully crafted environment made for beauty, enjoyment, and fruitfulness. For flourishing.

A context or picture of life in which all that we feel, experience and know is in relation to God.

And our Faith Practices are tools used to keep us faithfully participating in the ordinary work of garden life as daughters and sons, employees, roommates, neighbors, parents, friends, spouses, and the church. Not the summation of life in the garden, but actions and attitudes that help us remain steadfast and joyous; effective and fruitful in our faith.

So far we have seen that,

[Praying Scripture](#) & [Repentance](#) orient us to the conditions of God's garden. Reminding us that our story is found in the all-encompassing, gracious, and sure story of God's character and purposes. Awakening us to a much larger world!

[Listening](#) in the Spirit is the *fundamental act for all work* in the garden. We recognize that the world is neither limited to us nor controlled by us, so in order to walk wisely we must be ones who hear and see God; most evidently in Jesus! Every action begins in a listening response.

[Stopping](#), helps us to *recognize & enter into the rhythmic seasons* of the garden. Discovering a pattern for life that is attuned to how God works in the good times and the bad all for our good and his glory. Allowing us to find stability in what often appears to be chaos.

[Mindfulness](#), a form of stopping, helps us to *identify disproportion & respond in proportion* to our emotions and experiences. Giving us a daily and moment-by-moment centering that develops an awareness and release from the tension of circus life.

[Sabbath Keeping](#), another form of stopping, is *a gift meant to help us flourish* in the most prevalent of all garden activities: *work*, amid the most pervasive of garden resources: *time*. Taking what often is experienced as conflict, and allowing us to live in peace.

As we continue the series this afternoon we will be looking at Faith Practice, like stopping, that is somewhat counter cultural, at least not a priority emphasized in our daily life. Today we will see that the Faith Practice of Friendship helps us enjoy and experience life in the garden with depth and vividness.

FRIENDSHIP...REALLY?

Let's be honest. When you heard that we would be looking at friendship as a Faith Practice, a spiritual discipline, you were a bit skeptical right? Prayer, repentance and Sabbath keeping seem straight forward enough; after all those are all rather significant biblical terms. Even listening, specifically listening to the Spirit as we behold Jesus, and mindful meditation on Jesus; if new in terminology and framing at least seemed somewhat familiar to our concept of religious practice. But friendship? Really?

Why do you think we react in such a manner to the practice of friendship as a spiritual endeavor? Could it be that we regard friendship as an accessory to life; an add-on for certain seasons of life? Perhaps we do not distinguish friendliness or kindness and friendship? Or, and, could it be that we have accepted the cultural understanding of friendship as,

“...a love relationships considered to be ordinary, even *unnecessary*, experienced privately and usually *without examination*. This seemingly garden-variety love, less prone than other kinds of love to hellish and heavenly extremes, is broadly defined as mutual, egalitarian, non-sexual, private, free relationship of uncertain duration and variable intensity...trumped in adult life by the demands of work and family within a culture of fragmentation and an ethos of self-determination.”¹

Regardless, little attention in the academic world, popular writing, and even the Christian sub-culture is paid to the role of friendship in a person's life and even less to how one develops, maintains and strengthens friendships. Leveraging people, certainly you can find all kinds of tips; enjoying people, easy enough to find encouragement to do so; but **the work of befriending is almost absent form most conversations.**

Ironically though, we measure the ability to develop and maintain friendship in childhood as an indicator for healthy and successful adulthood! The ability to develop and interact with friends is mark of social stability and has correlations for the future of the child. Yet, the focus on friendship seems limited to childhood. As one sociologist notes,

“Childhood friendship is viewed as a kind of rocket booster launching people into adulthood, then falling away as mature orbit is achieved.”²

Somehow we live in a context in which friendship is an outgrown necessity. An unnecessary luxury for life. Yet, something in us as humans longs for profound joining to others. As author Lynne M. Baab argues,

“...perhaps the enthusiastic embrace of all [our] forms of electronic communication isn't so much a desperate response as a simple indicator of **the deep truth that people thrive on connections with others**, and they will use whatever means are available to build and sustain relationships.”³

¹ Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*, 169-170.

² Ibid. 171.

³ Quoted in Phillips, 180.

The danger comes in how engaging in friendship electronically changes and or shapes the foundation for our understanding of friendship overall. Phillips warns,

“...when placed on an electronic device, friendship is disembodied and may feel more like entertainment and, as is the case with both civic involvement and religious participation, becomes increasingly optional in our daily life.”⁴ (174)

We no longer experience or think of friendship in a picture of God’s pervasive garden and its rhythms, but in the continuous movement of our circus life. **A product by which we are entertained not a virtue that brings life to our faith.**

Remember, we are always being cultivated. And the more shallow, less intimate and briefer relationships do not “cultivate character” like friendship. So we think it unnecessary. Wait, not all of us.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, comments that,

“Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (for God did not need to create). It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival...

...To the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the *school of virtue*. The modern world, in comparison, ignores it.”⁵

After all, “Studies of health and well-being conclude that social ties are health-generating (salutogenic), while isolation tends to foster illness (pathogenic).”⁶ Better said by the poet,

“Let us be grateful to the people who make us happy; they are the charming gardens who make our souls blossom.”⁷

So why then is friendship something more than an accessory, an unnecessary add-on needed for flourishing in God’s garden? Well, because **Friendship is a school of virtue!**

⁴ Phillips, 174.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 69, 71.

⁶ Phillips, 166.

⁷ Marcel Proust quoted in Phillips, 165.

THE SCHOOL OF FRIENDSHIP

Listen to this insight on maturity of friendship, and see if you can determine when it was written,

“...when it is young people who form a friendship, the object of it, we all think, is the pleasure they get from it. This seems natural, when we reflect that the life of the young is one emotion after another, their grand object being to amuse themselves and catch the moments as they fly. And as they grow older the things that please them change too, so that they both make and drop friends quickly. (Their affections change with the source of their pleasures, and their tastes change rapidly.) Also the young are much subject to the passion of love, which for the most part is a longing for delight working upon the emotions. And so it comes about that they fall in and out of love quickly, often passing from one stage to the other before the day is out. But of course the young desire to pass the hours in the society of their friends. For that is what friendship means to them, and that is what they get.”⁸

Would you guess that this observation on friendship was written nearly 2,400 years ago, by Aristotle! In fact two of Aristotle’s ten chapters in his foundational, culture setting work on ethics are dedicated to the topic of friendship! As one author reminds us,

“For centuries philosophers have wrestled with a paradoxical cry of the heart attributed to Aristotle: ‘O my friends, there is no friend.’ In keeping with his own theory, the philosopher may have been longing for **a soul friendship** in the midst of other friendships, **something deeper and stronger than a buddy kind of friendship based on pleasure, or a networking one based on utility**. Aristotle wrote of this truer friendship as a school of virtue, and in the twelfth century the Cistercian monk Aelred of Rievaulx called it a school of charity. Reflecting on how political conflicts ravage our lives today, Milan Kundera declared that ‘unlike the puerile [immature] loyalty to a conviction, loyalty to a friend is a virtue—perhaps the only virtue, the last remaining one.’”⁹

As C.S. Lewis noted, the concept of friendship as we know it is lost, but it has not always been the case. Friendship has long been thought to be a school of virtue, a context for not just learning but forming, a place of cultivation! **Thus friendship requires commitment, time, energy, resources in order to be formed.**

In other words, friendship is a labor in which our character is formed. It is, as Peter reminds us, a supplement to our faith; a character trait that brings to life fully that which is implanted in us and true of us, in Jesus.

Let me explain by reading together 2 Peter 1:1-11.

⁸ Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson, 232-233.

⁹ Phillips, 168.

SUPPLEMENTING FAITH WITH FRIENDSHIP

The concept of *supplement* in 2 Peter is theatrical, a term meant to describe a chorus, the music that adds depth and vividness to what is playing out on stage. Thus the characteristics listed in verses 5-7 are meant to add depth and vividness to the life of faith playing out in God's Story.

Notice the sixth "supplement", in most translations it is the term "brotherly affection" coming from the Greek word *Philadelphia*; better translated "familial affection". A term full of emotion from loving to liking to enjoying and many things in-between. **An emotion tied with action that starts for the family, for those alongside you in life.** And one that is purposely distinguished from *agape* love of the seventh characteristic.

To understand this affection, we need to be aware of something contextual here in Peter's final letter. The language Peter uses is meant to reflect the language of his church family, language that would understand the virtues of the Greek philosophers used to inform a picture of the good life. And so in these supplements, Peter is helping his friends and family pursue those qualities in life that would allow them to be persevering, joyous and fruitful in their faith. **Giving them a transformed picture of the good life in their context.**

And so, he re-angles the Greek word used by Aristotle, "*philia*, the feeling which friends have for one another. Since this may run through the whole gamut of emotions between love and liking, it cannot be translated by any English word, though in general 'friendship' will serve."¹⁰ **And now Peter adds a familial connection, recognition that something more permanent and other that binds the affections.** The same word Paul uses in Romans 12:10, translated by one commentator as "Be good friends". A connection that went beyond physical relations to those who lives were shared.

And so, these characteristics bring depth and vividness to faith and even effectiveness and fruitfulness in faith! Sought after, they are both the product and the means of forming our character. Therefore we can say, **that true friendship requires character and true friendships form character.**

Thus friendship is a quality that can be possessed, practiced and increased (2 Pet. 1:7-10) and one that is the way we live effectively and fruitfully in the kingdom garden (2 Pet. 1:11)!

Remember, Peter is using language here that is meant to reflect the Greek philosophers who rightly understood the virtue of friendship,

"one of the things which life can least afford to be without...a necessity of human nature...a good thing and a precious...not only...necessary to the good life, it is in itself a good and beautiful thing...the possession of many friends has always been considered one of the things that ennoble existence."¹¹

This is why friendship is a school of virtue as C.S. Lewis contends; a place of formation.

Because true friendship, friendship that is more than friendliness or kindness because of pleasurable company or profitable gain, requires a mutuality that shifts our affections, a "mutual goodwill"¹².

For it is "those who desire the good of their friends for their friend's sake who are most completely friends, since each loves the other for what the other is in themselves and not for something they have about them which they need not

¹⁰ J.A.K. Thomason, in Aristotle's *Ethics*, 237.

¹¹ Aristotle, 227-228.

¹² Ibid. 231.

have. Accordingly, the friendship of such [persons] lasts as long as they keep their goodness—and goodness is a lasting quality [a virtue or character].”¹³

In friendship I do not need the other to be something or give something. Certainly they are and do, but **in true friendship the essence of the person is what I cling to, what keeps me engaged and giving.** Something binds that is more permanent than pleasure or utility.

Friendship most certainly begins advantageously, a perception of receiving something from the other whether pleasure or profitability. And true friendship includes these benefits, but is something deeper. For “the friendship of good [persons] has all those qualities which belong to them as their essential attributes. **For the friends are alike—recognize a likeness—absolutely and in themselves...**”¹⁴

As we participate in true, unselfish, mutually blessing friendship; we are able to recognize a likeness in others; to them as we indeed are and are seen. We recognize an essence of the good—the divine nature in which we are partakers because of Jesus (2 Pet. 1:4-5), and thus are able to love them and like them as ourselves.

Therefore the spiritual discipline, faith practice of friendship practices us, forms us, and **trains us to love our neighbor as ourselves!** Specifically and developing; after all this virtue is to be ever increasing. A handful, a community, a neighborhood, a city, a world.

When we have friends and are friends, soul friends, our capacity to love expands and thus we are able to enter into, participate fully within the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, bearing fruit in our knowledge of Jesus by which all things that pertain to life and godliness are granted to us, given us through Jesus—including this virtue (1 Pet. 1:11, 3)!

¹³ Ibid. 233.

¹⁴ Ibid. note on 233.

FRIENDS WITH JESUS

Peter recognized this virtue, this supplement meant to bring life to his faith, because of his friendship with Jesus! What?!

Do you not find it interesting, intriguing even that it is in the final moments at dinner and in a strolling conversation with his closest followers that Jesus serves them, knowing not all will remain faithful to him, giving them a new command to love one another as a way to show whose they are (Jn. 13). Promising that they will not be alone in their journey of life, in continuing to follow him when he is the **resurrected Lord and Living Savior**.

Why can he encourage them so? Because they are his friends,

“Greater love has no one that this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you [mutuality – not simply a friendliness like the disciples of John 6 or perhaps even Nicodemus of Jn. 3]. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that *you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit would abide*, so that whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.” (Jn. 15:12-17)

In our friendship fruit is born. For in our friendship we show that we love God and love others, we see God in one another—as the essence, image, and likeness that bonds us. We need not our friend to be something or do something for us; rather simply be in the friendship (relational mutuality).

We long for their good in the same way Jesus longed for our good; giving of himself, sharing his life with us as well as sacrificing it for us. How incredibly mind-blowing that friendship is such a means by which God’s Spirit and purposes move and change the world!

Being a friend is being like Jesus and in some way experiencing what we have in Jesus!

The virtue of friendship is a spiritual discipline because we “...need time and intimacy to establish perfect friendship.”¹⁵ After all, “**Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow-ripening fruit**”¹⁶.

Friendship is a form a Faith Practice which aligns us with the work of the garden in the rhythm of the garden. After all,

“Friendship is a form of attachment and requires attention. Unmeasured time and freely given attention are aspects of the garden and friendship. Discipline, too, is needed for attunement and reattunement to the health of relationships and gardens.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid. 234

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Phillips, 178.

As Aristotle noted, “Liking has the character of an emotion, **friendship of a confirmed disposition.**”¹⁸ Thus there is no permanence in friendliness—simple kindness. No shame in it, in fact a general disposition towards kindness is a fruit of the Spirit.

However, there is no charactering forming, character produced vitality either. Transformation comes in the time and energy of friendship not simply friendliness; in the long-obedient work of tilling the soil with and for others; to commitment through thick and thin to see the fruit ripen and reproduce.

¹⁸ Aristotle, 237.

PRACTICING FRIENDSHIP

So, how do we practice friendship?

While we will look in detail at some of the skills of forming and deepening friendship next time we gather; today we can begin practicing friendship by spending some time reflection on how friendship fits into our life even now.

Examining the VALUE of Relationship

Are relationships of significant value to us? Are relationship with Christ who calls us friend and our relationship with others whom we are bound to in Jesus and through his blood?

When we think about our friends and friendship who would we call buddies, network connections, and true friends? What distinguishes each?

What's the bond like between the different types of friends? Have you experienced depth and vividness to your life of faith in friendship?

Making ROOM for Relationship

Friendship requires space: physical space of time, as well as emotional space. Are you open to the cost of friendship, as well as the benefits?

Taking RESPONSIBILITY for Relationship

Seeking the good of the other simply for who they are in our likeness—in our essence. One of the things we value as Christ City is taking responsibility for one another, not simply waiting for others to do so for me. We believe this is what God calls us to as a gift for being a part of his family; a mutuality that compels me to love another.

In what ways do you take responsibility for your friends and their good? In what ways do you fail to do so?