

“Home: No Longer Strangers”
John 15:12-16

There have been a lot of changes in the way we relate to each other since the invention of cell phones and smartphones. In the last two to three years, there has been a new trend in how we connect with each other using phones. Here is a little video to explain the new phone etiquette: <https://youtu.be/lCv-3lxY8Jl>.

What I noticed is that we have less and less personal and embodied connections with each other. Even making a simple phone call now has to be scheduled. And this has had an isolating impact on us.

According to social scientist Robert Putnam, we have a major decline in social connections in our country. Here are some of the numbers that could give us an overview of what is happening:

60% DECLINE

...from the 1970s to the 1990s in the amount of picnics Americans attended annually

40% DECLINE

...from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of Americans who attended even one public meeting on town or school affairs in the previous year

50% DECLINE

...from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of Americans who took any leadership role in any local organization

35% DECLINE

...from the 1960s to the 2020s in religious congregation membership

50% DECLINE

...from the 1970s to the 1990s in the number of times Americans attended a club meeting the previous year

Someone might say, “so what, isn’t it more peaceful to keep to ourselves and to minimize social interaction?” You may also think of all the headaches and challenges of friendship and human relationships. Here is a simple video to explain the importance of our social connections: https://youtu.be/u9iK_nKrsc8.

And even if we ignore the societal benefits of getting to know our neighbors and being a part of community groups, we would do well not to ignore the emotional and health benefits of friendship and caring connections. When we have close friends or belong to a church community, we find incredible gifts of support and learn to grow even from our conflicts and mistakes.

The twelfth-century Cistercian monk Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) viewed friendship with other people as a way to deepen our friendship with God in Christ. In his classic work *Spiritual Friendship*, he writes, “How happy, how carefree, how joyful you are if you have a friend with whom you may talk as freely as with yourself, to whom you neither fear to confess any fault nor blush at revealing any spiritual progress, to whom you may entrust all the secrets of your heart and confide all your plans. And what is more delightful than so to unite spirit to spirit and so to make one out of two that there is neither fear of boasting nor dread of suspicion? A friend’s correction does not cause pain, and a friend’s praise is not considered flattery.”

Jesus gave us a powerful example of friendship in his relationship with his disciples. As a teacher in the Jewish faith, it would have been normal for him to have followers who would learn from him. He would have been seen as their superior who would impart knowledge to them. But Jesus gave his disciples something more. Instead of putting himself above them, he shared life and knowledge with them as equals. He saw their worth not just as people who would spread his message, but as ones he was so deeply connected to. Friendship was the foundation of Jesus’ ministry and mission.

The setting for our Bible reading is the Last Supper. Jesus was about to leave his disciples and so he focused on what was most important in their life together. When we are faced with death, we tend to focus on what is real and not all the silly stuff of life. Jesus gave them the most important commandment that he could think of because he knew that it was the only thing that was going to sustain them without his presence. It was the commandment to love one another as he had loved them. Let’s listen to John 15:12-16

¹² ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

These disciples were going to face an uphill battle to do the work of Christ after he left them, but he knew that their love for one another was going to sustain them. The bond they formed with him and with each other could not be broken. There was no hardship strong enough to sever or shake it. Jesus didn't leave his disciples a book of instructions or a hierarchy or a structure of how to do things. He instead focused on the heart. He knew that they would be able to figure out the details later if they had that foundational experience of friendship, love, and community. They lived, traveled, and worked together for 3 years. That is an intense kind of connection. If you have ever travelled with people, you know that it is a major test of your friendship because you get to be with people at their best and at their worst. Their community survived all of that and because they had a solid foundation for life.

Another key piece in this amazing gift that Jesus gave was that of their relationship to God as a friend. To see God as a friend who loves and cares unconditionally without trying to get something in return changed their whole worldview and the trajectory of their lives.

We are included in this friendship with God and with the community. Despite the growing focus of our culture on individualism and isolation, we are blessed to know the true wisdom of love that leads to joy and peace in life. COVID accelerated the rate of isolation, even in church life where people felt even more disconnected from community. The trauma of COVID will take a few years to leave us. We are working our way back from that sense of isolation and fear of community gatherings. If you have not found your way back to community gatherings, dig deep within your heart and listen to the promptings of the Spirit to reconnect and to re-engage.

Today, I would also like to invite you to consider the time you spend in disembodied communications, even with your friends. Consider what the Spirit is nudging you to attend to your heart's need for meaningful and embodied connections. I also invite you to consider the people around you, maybe people at church or in your neighborhood who are longing for friendship and a deep sense of connection. Turn to a neighbor and share any thoughts that you may have about this. Pay attention to anything that God is bringing to your attention about friendship and care for our neighbors.

We will end with a video song by children seeing the light and beauty in each other: <https://youtu.be/CulSBzCVvrc>. Amen.