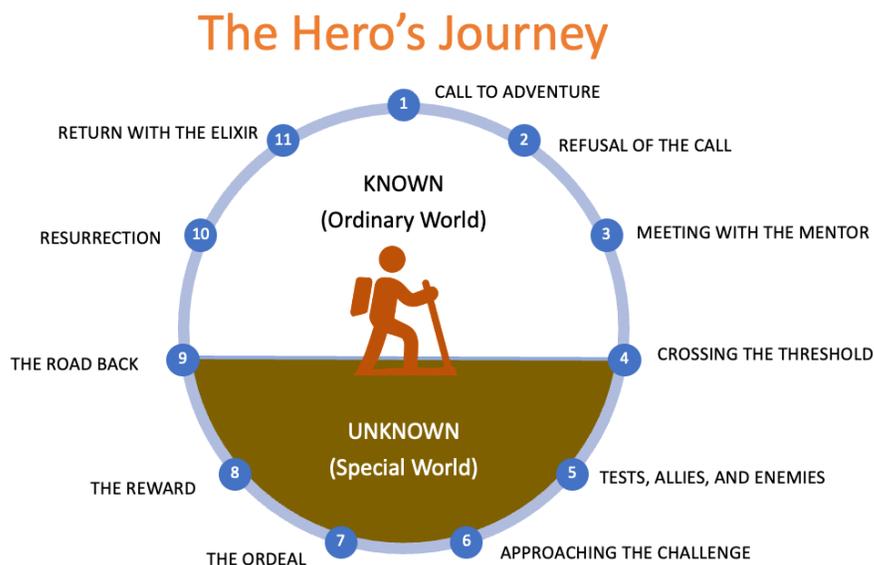


“Soul Friends”  
Genesis 2:18-22

I want to begin with a real-life story about the power of community and of friendship. A woman travels from Portugal and comes to a small town in Western New York to visit her son in prison. She has limited resources and very little English. She does not know how to get to Attica, but she is determined to find a way there. She decides to walk into a church on a Sunday morning to share her need with honesty and vulnerability. A few people gather around her. Some pray with her. Some find her a place to stay. Some give her a ride. And some get her some extra food. I am grateful to say that this woman is Odilia who walked into this church and the people who welcomed her with open arms are you! This was two years ago, and since then Odilia has returned for a couple of other visits and you have stepped up to show the same **hospitality and spirit of friendship in Christ’s way**.

The story of Odilia is a powerful example of a core truth: **We need each other on the journey of life and of faith**. None of us can walk this path alone if we want to grow and fulfill our purpose here on earth.

One of the famous images for the journey of life comes from Joseph Campbell’s work about “The Hero’s Journey.” You can find an excellent overview of the process here: <https://youtu.be/d1Zxt28ff-E>.



This journey, as Campbell describes, is a cycle that takes the hero from their Ordinary World into an unfamiliar Special World, passing through many stages. One of the critical stages is “**Assistance**,” where the hero receives help, usually from someone older and

wiser. In the broader pattern of this human journey, we find the key component of **Companions**—those who mentor us, challenge us, and walk with us. The Celts thought of these companions as our *anam cara*, or **soul friends**. They saw them as necessary for our transformation. As St. Bridgid of Kildare once said, **“Anyone without a soul friend is like a body without a head.”**

This deep, human need for companionship is written into our sacred texts from the very beginning. In the story of creation from **Genesis 2:18-22**, we are told about our need for one another in this way:

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ 19 So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.”

The message is clear: from the beginning, humans were created to be in relationship. The stories of creation in the book of Genesis are true, not because we can go back and verify that they happened literally, but because they happen all the time. They are patterns for our human life that give us wisdom for living according to God’s vision.

The people of faith have known that humans were created to be in community: with God, with one another, and with all of the creatures of the world. This foundational story in Genesis was told to teach people about God’s intention and vision for humanity. Adam, the creature of the earth and the first human, supposedly had everything, including the ability to be with God directly, but something important was missing. The word **“good”** was a running thread in the story of creation. Every time God created something, God would call it good. And here we have something that is **“not good.”** The state of being alone is deemed as not good for humanity. Adam had all the basic necessities of life and all the skills he needed to make it happen, but it was *not good for him to be alone*. He needed a companion. This was one of the hallmarks of the good life. From the beginning, we are created for community.

Even though our social structures have changed and evolved through the centuries, one thing has remained the same: **We need others on the journey of life.** We can’t find our way through life, especially on the inner journey and for living out our purpose, without companions on the way. There are those who guide us, those who teach us, those who love us, those who nurture us, those who challenge us, those who struggle

with us, those who labor with us, and those who uphold us in prayer. There has never been a person who grew in spirit without the help and support of others.

As far as we know, Jesus did not write one word for us to read, but he left us a community. He invested in relationships. He had a group of close friends and disciples and connected with people around him. He started a movement through people. He touched people, ate with them, prayed with them, talked to them, healed them, argued with them, and challenged them.

For the four weeks of this sermon series, we are invited to be intentional about community and soul friendships. These are the people you connect with on the deepest level of your being and who help to hold a nonjudgmental space for you to allow God's presence to dwell in your heart.

We are invited to give thanks for the people who have been our soul friends. We are going to use one of the prayer stations for lifting up these names and their stories. I also want to invite you to identify one person in your life, from this church or another circle of friends, to practice the **Examen** with them once or more a week. This is a simple and powerful way to deepen a friendship or relationship into a soul friendship.

### **The Practice of the Examen**

The "Examen" refers to a prayer practice of reviewing your day to reflect on the presence of God. It is a reflective exercise rooted in Ignatian spirituality and helps in discerning where you are drawing closer to or moving further from God.

The five-step Examen:

1. **Become aware of God's presence:** Start by being still and consciously recognizing that you are in God's presence. Acknowledge God's love and ask for God's grace to help you see your day clearly.
2. **Review your day with gratitude:** Go through your day and thank God for the joys and gifts you experienced. Note what you are grateful for, including moments that felt especially good.
3. **Pay attention to your emotions:** Reflect on your feelings throughout the day. Notice which emotions drew you closer to God and which pulled you away, and consider what they might be telling you about your spiritual state.
4. **Choose one feature of the day and pray:** Select a specific moment, thought, or feeling that stands out. Pray from that experience, whether it involves asking for forgiveness, seeking guidance, or simply dwelling in gratitude for that moment.
5. **Look forward to tomorrow:** Consider the day ahead. Ask for God's guidance for challenges and think about how you can collaborate more effectively with God.

One way to share this practice with a friend is to simply ask or share a response to this question: **Where have you seen God today or recently?**

We will take a few moments to do just that. Where have you seen God recently?

Here is a blessing from John O'Donohue:

May you be blessed with good friends.

May you learn to be a good friend to yourself.

May you be able to journey to that place in your soul where there is great love, warmth, feeling, and forgiveness.

May this change you.

May it transfigure that which is negative, distant, or cold in you.

May you be brought in to the real passion, kinship, and affinity of belonging.

May you treasure your friends.

May you be good to them and may you be there for them;

may they bring you all the blessing, challenges, truth, and light that you need for your journey.

May you never be isolated.

May you always be in the gentle nest of belonging with your *anam cara* (soul friend).

Amen.