

Homily – Friends Through God

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Every Friday night at 8pm Jeff and I do a Zoom video conference with two other couples. In the last five months we have socialized in person only once with others, but every Friday night for the past twenty-five weeks, we have gathered with the same four friends over the ether. Some of you may do the same. And, I know that others of you have chosen a few people to be part of your bubble or pod. With a bubble or pod you have selected a few friends or family, and you safely gather with them in-person. You observe physical distancing and maybe even wear masks. Sometimes we can still safely gather with friends.

Family and friends are important to us. I am convinced that God has created us as social beings. We are made to be in community with others. We are made to need friends, but in these times that can be hard to do. As I drive through the Arroyo Grande Village to get here to the church, I can see that friends have started gathering at restaurants for outdoor dining. Outdoor dining is supposed to be safer than other activities, but for some this is still not recommended. Many of us feel an empty hole that used to be filled by friends. We have had to resort to phone calls and video call. We have had to adapt to fulfill our need for friends. As I said a moment ago, even when we are sheltered at home, God created us to need and have friends.

“Friendship” can be defined as a relationship of mutual affection between people. It is a stronger form of interpersonal bond than an association, and it has been studied in academic fields including communication, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. Although there are many forms of friendship, certain characteristics are present in the best of these relationships. These characteristics include affection; kindness, love, virtue, sympathy, empathy, honesty, altruism, loyalty, generosity, forgiveness, mutual understanding and compassion. Friendship means enjoyment of each other's company, trust, and the ability to be oneself. It means we can express our feelings to others, and make mistakes without fear of judgment from the friend. Friendship is an essential aspect of relationships, and therefore it is central to healthy spirituality. In the past, I have defined spirituality as relationships with God, others, and self. So, friendship is very important for our spiritual journey.

Now, in the last five months, I have started watching YouTube videos. There are 1.3 billion videos on YouTube. You can see everything from music videos to book reviews. People from all walks of life post videos about themselves, and there are a lots of educational videos. You can search to find videos to watch, but YouTube also has an algorithm, or formula, in which they guess video suggestions. At one point

YouTube suggested that I might like a channel called “The School of Life.” The School of Life says that they are a channel of videos which is dedicated to helping people lead calmer and more resilient lives. I watched some of the videos, and they are interesting. One of the videos that caught my attention is a six minutes video called “The Purpose of Friendships.” The video claims that there are five main reasons that we have friends.

First, friendship is about networking or collaboration. It is about banding together with another to get something done. As the saying goes “many hands make light work.” So, friendship is about joining with other to fulfill a task.

Second, friendship is about reassurance. When we see others have the same challenges and difficulties, then we feel better about our own circumstances. In this category of friend, I think of mothers who are friends and going through the same experiences of raising a child.

The third reason to have friends is for fun. With some trusted people we can be silly. We can let go of dignity. Curiously, this third type of friend, the fun friend, helps us let go of shame. Laughter is part of the reason to have this type of friend.

The fourth reason to have friends is to help process our own minds. It is often hard for us to think on our own, and this type of friend asks clarifying questions. This fourth type of friend helps us know ourselves better.

And lastly, there are friends from the past. This type of friend was originally from one of the first four categories of friend, but they are from a prior stage of our life. This fifth type of friend is redemptive because they help us remember an earlier part of our self. We can view the path we have been on and see how we have evolved. A friend from the past can even help us reclaim some of the old self that had been left behind.

Each of our friendships can be put into these five categories. And, it is not cynical to do this but can help us understand what is at the center of these genuine bonds we have with others. Again, these five categories of friends are about networking, common experiences, fun, a sounding board, and help us remembering the past. These friends help us get something done, reassure ourselves, let go of our shame, clarify our own minds, and remember our old selves. This list from the video seems to be pretty complete. Can you think of anything major that is missing? I can. And, that is God. God needs to be at the center of our friendships.

Today’s Gospel reading is about friendship. Jesus recognizes that friendship can take work, and friends can have conflict. Jesus recommends several steps to maintain

friendships. And, at the end of today's readings Jesus says something life changing about friendship. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." This sentence from Jesus gets at what I think was missing from The School of Life YouTube video. Friendship can be taken to the next level when we put Jesus, or God, at the center. Yes, friendship can meet the needs of self, but they are meant to be elevated to have God at the center. What would it mean to have God at the center of our networking, God at the center of our common experiences, God at the center of our fun, God at the center of our sounding board, and God at the center of remembering the past.

As I have said in prior sermons, I am convinced that God is always present with us. Whether we are aware or unaware, God is holding us in an eternal embrace of love. There is nothing we can do to increase God's love for us and through God's grace there is nothing we can do to decrease God's love for us. And, as Jesus tells us in today's Gospel reading, God is also available to be present in our friendships.

Now, the place that many of us get to practice this type of God centered relationship is through marriage. Marriage is meant to have all five categories of friendship. As you think about your spouse or daydream about a spouse you will have in the future it is not just about how beautiful they are, or how much money they bring into the relationship. Instead, a marriage is based on collaboration to get things done. It is based on common experiences. It is based on fun. It is having someone else as a sounding board. And, marriage, especially when it is longer than twenty years, is about remembering the past. And the best marriages, the ones that get through thick and thin, are the ones that have God at the center.

I recognize that some of you are widowed and I wonder if you are still able to be friends with your loved one. Do you think you can still be friends with someone who has died? And, I recognize that some of you are divorced or have never been married. You have to have your friendship needs met by a number of different people. Can you think of the friends in your life that fulfill the five roles of a friend? Can you see God at the center of those relationships?

When we put God at the center of our network friendship it means we are working together to help others with their needs.

When we put God at the center of shared experience friendship we talk about how God has been part of our daily living.

When we put God at the center of our fun relationships it is about building up others with our humor. It is about taking ourselves less seriously. It is about moving away from the stiff false self and growing into the dancing true self.

When we put God at the center of our sounding board friendships it is about discerning where God may be leading us to be the hands and feet and voice and eyes of Christ in the world.

When we put God at the center of our friends from the past, we see how God has been at work in our lives, even when we didn't know it. We can help the friend do the same. In the present moment, God's guiding hand often seems invisible, but in retrospect we say "oh, now I see how God had been at work."

When God is at the center of our friendships then friendship is characterized by affection; kindness, love, virtue, sympathy, empathy, honesty, altruism, loyalty, generosity, forgiveness, mutual understanding and compassion. Friendship means enjoyment of each other's company, trust, and the ability to be oneself. It means we can express our feelings to others, and make mistakes without fear of judgment from the friend.

This is what Jesus means when he says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Often these days we are limited in our in-person gatherings. Instead, our friendships have moved online or to the telephone.

I invite you to examine your friendships, and if needed shift them to take yourself out of the middle and put God there instead.