

# **Trinity United Methodist Church**

**March 1, 2020**

## **“Talking With God: Found A Friend”**

**Pastor Dan Elmore**

### **Scripture: John 15:9-17**

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

### **Sermon**

Before I get going this morning, I'd like to take a moment of personal privilege for a shout-out to two young lovebirds that are with us this morning. Today is my wonderful mom and dad's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. So happy anniversary! That's a long time to put up with somebody.

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

One of my best friends, his name is Steve. And Steve and I were roommates in college the last couple of years at Virginia Tech, **the** best college in Virginia. We hung out, of course, all the time in college. He was the neat freak in the apartment; I was not. And so we sort of bonded over that. A lot of people see us together and think that we're brothers because we look quite a bit alike. We hung out quite a bit after college. He got me into the band *Fighting Gravity*, if you're familiar with that college band in Virginia.

Like I said, many people thought we were brothers. In fact, one of Bekah and my first dates was with Steve as third wheel to a *Fighting Gravity* concert. Steve and I were in each other's weddings. He is Mark's godfather, and Bekah and I are godparents to his two kids. I baptized both of his kids, and so forth and so on.

But the thing about us is that our friendship, like many friendships, turned into one of those that the amount of time between when we talk or we visit with one another seems to grow longer and longer each time that we do so. Life just gets in the way. They're busy, we're busy. They live in North Carolina now; we live here in Smithfield, and so forth. But yet it's one of those types of friendships that, no matter how long it's been since we've seen each other or talked with each other, when we do so, we're able to pick right back up wherever we left off. I've got a handful of friends like that, and maybe you do as well.

Often these types of relationships, we might long for the old days that we had together. Typing this part of the sermon, I was fondly recalling many memories of Steve and I in Blacksburg together, and I was trying to think which one of those that came to mind I could actually share in church. Notice that I haven't shared any of them.

I will share one since my parents are here, since they were privy to this one. It was the last weekend, sort of, that I had in Blacksburg. So the last night in the apartment. The best thing about our apartment was that we were right down the street from downtown Blacksburg. So Steve and I looked at each other that last evening and said, "Let's go bar crawling." So we went down to downtown Blacksburg, and the next morning Mom and Dad were on their way into town to help me pack my part of the apartment to move. So I was supposed to meet them at Famous Anthony's, which is a great breakfast spot there in Blacksburg, and in Roanoke, too. So they called and said, "Hey, we're getting off 81," and I said, "you know, my stomach isn't feeling so well this morning, so y'all just go ahead and eat without me and just come to the apartment..." "Oh! You want us to bring you anything?" "Nope. No, don't bring me anything. I'm good, thank you."

It's one of those apartments where there's a little square hallway, and my door is here. Steve's door is here. So Mom walks in, he and I are in our respective beds, nursing water and so forth, and Mom just walks in between the two doors and looks at both of us and says, "So. Fun night, huh boys?" And both of us go, "Yes ma'am." And she says, "Good." And she points at me and says—I won't repeat all that she said—"You. Get your *butt* out of bed." And I did. So all right. That gives you an idea.

A lot of times in these types of friendships and relationships, though, we long for those old days and fun times that we had together. Sometimes random things pop up that remind you of the friend, and you might wonder in that moment what they might be

up to at that particular time. Of course, Facebook helps with some of this. But maybe you might hear others talk about such friendships and realize that you actually don't have any, and you might wonder why.

But there's another relationship in my life that I find to be very similar to Steve and my friendship, and that's my relationship with God. I've known God since my childhood. God and I go way back. I've known God my whole life. God has always been there. God and I have had some really great moments together: Youth retreats and my ordination and things like that. There's random things that pop up that remind me of God, like beautiful sunsets on the water here and things like that. But like that friendship with Steve and other friendships like it, life gets in the way, and the communication suffers. And I find that sometimes we go for far too long where the communication breaks down and isn't all that great.

Maybe you've got that kind of relationship with God as well. Maybe there's a longing to rekindle the closeness that you once felt with God. Or maybe there's a desire and a resolve to do better this time at staying in touch with God and talking with God. Maybe you don't have much of a relationship with God, if at all, and maybe there's a nudge that you've been feeling to seek out that relationship and to draw closer to God.

But in all this, we might say, but how? How do we go about doing that? And that's our focus over these next few weeks during Lent. Lent is that time of the church year leading up to Easter, and it's designed to help us experience the fullness of Easter by having us take a harder look at ourselves and see what we need to get rid of. "Lent" comes from the Latin word for "Spring," and you think of it like Spring cleaning, right? You get the cobwebs out. You throw out the junk that's just been collecting, and so forth. It's a time when we might inquire, how do we draw closer to God? How do we follow Jesus more closely as he leads us to the cross and ultimately to resurrection?

And we do so during Lent by a renewed focus on our spiritual disciplines. A lot of times Lent is just popularly focused on "what are you giving up for Lent?" A fun little activity, incidentally, I saw on Facebook was, if you have a smart phone with a predictive text option, where it pops up the three words across the top, type in, "For Lent, I'm giving up," and then hit that predictive text and see what it tells you. It's kind of fun, right? But a lot of times, that's what Lent gets so focused on. "I'm giving up chocolate." "I'm giving up sweets."

I always remember a guy in my home church said that he and his family were out and about, and he got talking with his family about what they were all giving up for Lent, and his daughter, who was very young at the time, piped up, "My daddy said he's giving up cussing for Lent!"

But it's more than that, right? It's more than just giving something up. It's about taking on something new, a new spiritual practice that can help you focus on God. And we do so, of course, primarily through prayer. Also through scripture reading, through fasting, abstinence, and a commitment to worship, but primarily through prayer.

Prayer is that first thing that we focus on. It's not incidental it's the first thing in our United Methodist membership vows. We vow to support the church through our *prayers*, presence, gifts, service and witness, right? It's important; that's why it's first. And prayer is at once so simple, but yet it's something that so many struggle with, including me. I was texting with a friend last night and talking about the sermon this morning. I said, you know, sometimes I feel like Paul when he says, "I'm the chief of sinners." And she said, "Yeah, but you use the word 'struggle,' too, a lot." So I said, "Oh yeah, so I'm the chief 'struggler.'" I'm driving the struggle bus, all right?

We could give a laundry list of reasons of why we struggle with prayer. We're too busy. We're too tired. A lot of times you say, "Well, tomorrow morning I'm going to get up earlier than the rest of the house. I'm going to pray in the morning." But you're so tired, you keep hitting the snooze button—at least that's what I do—and then, oh, the house is up and we've got to get going, we've got to get the kids out the door, etc., etc. Then, "I'll pray later," and then later comes and goes, and then you put your head on the pillow at night, and "Oh yeah, I was going to spend extra time in prayer today," so you start to pray, and before you know it you're out like a light.

Or, when I was growing up as a kid, it seemed that the pastors used to go on and on and on and on and on in their pastoral prayer for the morning. So I struggled to stay awake during that time. It just dawned on me in the first service, I played piano for the early service at the home church, and it was in the chapel, kind of like we have here, so it was a small room. Thankfully, during the midst of the pastor's pastoral prayer for the morning, somebody sitting near the front row on the piano side saw what was happening to me and they cleared their throat really, really loudly, so that it woke me up. And when I woke up, my face was *this far* from the piano keys, about to go *thunk!* into the keyboard in the middle of this pastoral prayer.

Maybe we're too tired to pray, right? Maybe we're too preoccupied. Maybe we're distracted too easily. And all these reasons are just *my* reasons why I struggle with prayer. Maybe they're yours, too. We could go on and on.

For some people that I talk with in counseling and so forth, there's a guilt factor there. Would God still want to hear my prayers, they ask, after what I've done, or said, or thought? Would God still want to hear my prayers after I've been away for so long? And for some, they just haven't had that much of a relationship with God. Yeah, God's up

there somewhere, sure. Maybe he's looking out for me, yeah. But talk to him? Pffft. Whatever.

And yet, *God wants us to come to Him*. Our theme verse for the year is **Seek first the kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well**. And if you remember from the "Seek" sermon, we looked at Isaiah 55: "**Seek** the Lord while He may be found. **Call** on Him while He is near." And Jeremiah: "You will **seek** Me and **find** Me when you **seek** Me with all your heart."

And in today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus is with his followers. They're in the Upper Room. It's His last night before His crucifixion. They have the Last Supper, where we get Holy Communion, and so forth. In John's gospel, Jesus is teaching them quite a bit more about who He is. He says, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." He says that he is the vine, we are the branches. God the Father is the gardener who prunes us so that we can stay more attached to Jesus. And then He tells them, "If you do what I command, you are my friends." Now just to be clear, Jesus is God in the flesh. Jesus is still Jesus, God is still God. In Isaiah, God is so holy that the angels cover their eyes when they're in His presence. God is other than us; God is completely different from us, but yet God chose to take human form for us to be able to relate to him, among other things. God is still God, though. Jesus is not our homeboy. Jesus is our friend, but Jesus is still holy. And yet, here He is telling us, "Come to me."

In Matthew's gospel, he says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." Here He's saying, "Come to me, talk with me as a friend. I don't call you servants, but I call you my friends." And in the very next verse, he says, "You didn't choose me, but I chose you." In Methodism, we call that grace. We don't just randomly wake up one day and say, "Hey, Jesus, let's be friends," before Jesus is placing things in our lives to draw us to Him and help us come to that realization that He's already chosen us, all of us, as friends.

So as such, we're not only able to talk with God, but we can talk with God like we do a friend. He initiates that friendship with you and me. Even if you don't have any earthly friends. Like Nancy said this morning, the friend we can always count on is Jesus. Maybe we get caught up in having to impress others, try for other people's approval. It's a professional and a personal trap for me. But Jesus wants to be our friend no matter what. That's the kind of relationship God desires with us and with everyone. And that's the starting point for talking with God. Talking like we talk with a friend.

I remember one time when I was exploring church planting, I e-mailed a non-Methodist church planter in Sterling, Virginia, up in northern Virginia, where we lived at the time. I said, "Hey, can I pick your brain over lunch?" So he graciously met with me. So we're sitting outside, a nice spring day at a corner bakery, and they deliver our food

and he says, “Let’s pray.” So as I get ready to bow my head and close my eyes, he starts talking. “God, we thank you for this lovely day. We thank you for the company. We thank you for the food.” And he’s looking at me. He’s kind of looking around a little bit, but he’s making eye contact with me. And I’m thinking, *Dude, you know I’m not God, right?* But what it was—he was talking like God was sitting in the third chair there at the table. And isn’t that what’s really going on? Jesus loved to gather with us in meals throughout the Gospels. And when it comes to prayer, we’re often taught, right? Bow your heads, close your eyes, fold your hands, right? That’s what we teach our children. And we do that because it’s helpful sometimes to close our eyes so we don’t get distracted by things going on around us. But I don’t know about you, but my ADD actually kicks into overdrive when I do that. Not to mention, I usually am tired enough that if I close my eyes, I’m probably going to be out in a little while. So that’s not good either.

You don’t have to close your eyes to pray. And one of the best methods that helps me concentrate in prayer is to use the overactive imagination and picture Jesus sitting there with me. I’m sitting there in my recliner, got my coffee, got my Bible and so forth, and picture Jesus over there on my couch. Kicked back, legs crossed on the ottoman, right? Saying, “Hey, I’m ready to talk with you this morning. What’s up?” And talk with Him like we would with a friend.

So take a minute. Close your eyes if you want, but use your imagination and picture Jesus sitting there next to you. What do you want to say that you haven’t said? For those of us who maybe have been following Jesus for years but have gotten stuck in a rut and going through the motions, what do we need to say to God? Maybe it’s just, *“Thank you. I’m thankful for you. Thank you, Jesus, for rescuing me. Thank you for finding me when I was lost. Thank you for carrying me when I couldn’t walk myself. Thank you for family. Thank you for all the good things in my life.”* Maybe it’s to ask for forgiveness. Say, *“Jesus, I’m sorry. Forgive me for my mistakes, big and small. Forgive me of my past, of my sin. Forgive me for not spending more time with you.”*

Maybe it’s, *“Jesus, I surrender to you. I give you control. Help me to trust you. Please be near me.”* Maybe it’s to get real with Him and to bring your doubts. *“Are you even real? Are you really with me? Do you really have a plan for my life? Do you really care about me?”* Maybe it’s to pray the prayer of the man in scripture that said, *“I believe. Help my unbelief.”* Maybe it’s, *“I don’t know you, but I want to.”*

Maybe it’s to make a request. *“Please fix my marriage. Please help me make better decisions. Please be with my loved one who’s battling cancer or other illnesses. Please heal me.”* And maybe it’s simply just declaring our love for Him. *“I love you, and I want to know you more. Thank you for loving me, imperfections and all.”*

Because when it boils down to it, prayer isn't reciting a bunch of words that just roll off our tongue without thinking about it. Prayer isn't trying to stay awake. Prayer isn't checking a box. Prayer is talking with God, the creator of the entire universe, who yet knows every hair on our heads (or that used to be there). And we're not only *able* to talk with God, but we *get* to talk with Him, like we talk with a friend.

So I think I'm going to go home today and give Steve a call and see how they're doing. And maybe there's that friend that you need to do that as well. But most importantly, this Lent and always, talk with God like we do with a friend.

Thanks be to God. Amen.