

“Fellowship! - Holding the Christ-Light for Each Other”

1 Peter 4:7-11 ¹

My Mother spent the last two weeks of her life on earth in the Baptist Hospice House in Memphis, where she received extraordinarily compassionate care. In my experience, at least, hospice houses are what are sometimes called “thin places.” Do you know that term? It’s a term that’s sometimes used to describe places where the boundary between this world and the next is thinner than usual, and where extraordinary spiritual experiences frequently occur.

Another somewhat unusual use of the word “thin” is in the phrase, “caught up in the thick of thin things.” In the sense of that phrase, I want to ask you this morning whether you are “living thinly” or whether you are living deeply, abundantly, and fruitfully.

As we continue our journey “around the bases” in considering the five dimensions of our congregational life—**Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, and Evangelism**; or WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO—our focus today is on “first base,” or Fellowship. Our congregational mission statement describes “Fellowship” as “**Building the bonds of the diverse family of God in love and unity,**” and that’s what we’re considering this morning. The key verses from our text that relate to this theme are 1 Peter 4:8-9: ***8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.***

When Heidi Neumark was a student at Brown University in the mid-seventies, she took a year off to volunteer with Rural Mission on Johns Island, South Carolina, just west of Charleston, not too far from where Matt & Anna live. As Heidi put it . . .

“The most important lesson I learned on Johns Island was from Miss Ellie, who lived miles down a small dirt road in a one-room, wooden home. I loved to visit her. We’d sit in old rocking chairs on the front porch, drinking tall glasses of sweet tea, while she’d tell me stories punctuated with Gullah expressions that would leap from her river of thought like bright, silver fish: ‘Girl, I be so happy I could jump the sky!’ I never could find out Miss Ellie’s precise age, but it was somewhere between 90 and 100. Maybe she didn’t know herself. She still chopped her own firewood, stacked in neat little piles behind the house.

“Miss Ellie had a friend named Netta whom she’d known since they were small girls. In order to get to Netta’s house, Miss Ellie had to walk for miles through fields of tall grass. This was the sweet grass that Sea Island women make famous baskets out of, but it was also home to numerous poisonous snakes: coral snakes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and copperheads.

“Actually, Netta’s home was not that far from Miss Ellie’s place, but there was a stream that cut across the fields. You had to walk quite a distance to get to the place where it narrowed enough to pass. I admired Miss Ellie, who would set off to visit her friend full of bouncy enthusiasm, with no worry for the snakes or the long miles. I also felt sorry for her. Poor Miss Ellie, I thought, old and arthritic, having to walk all that way, pushing through the thick summer heat, not to mention the snakes.

“I felt sorry for her—until I hit upon the perfect plan. I arranged with some men to help build a simple plank bridge across the stream near Miss Ellie’s house. I scouted out the ideal place—not too wide, but too deep to cross. I bought and helped carry the planks there myself. Our bridge was built in a day. I was so excited that I could hardly wait to see Miss Ellie’s

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on January 22, 2012.

reaction. I went to her house, where she wanted to sit in her rocker and tell stories, but I was too impatient with my project. I practically dragged her off with me. ‘Look!’ I shouted, ‘a shortcut for you to visit Netta!’

“Miss Ellie’s face did not register the grateful, happy look I expected. There was no smile, no jumping the sky. Instead, for a long time, she looked puzzled, then she shook her head and looked at me as though I were the one who needed pity. ‘Child, I don’t need a shortcut.’ And she told about all the friends she kept up with on her way to visit Netta. A shortcut would cut her off from Mr. Jenkins, with whom she always swapped gossip; from Miss Hunter, who so looked forward to the quilt scraps she’d bring by; from the raisin wine she’d taste at one place in exchange for her biscuits; and the chance to look in on the ‘old folks’ who were sick.

“‘Child,’ she said again, ‘can’t take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don’t mix with love.’”²

“You can’t take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don’t mix with love.” Miss Ellie was a wise woman. From the very beginning, the Bible tells us that “*It is not good for the man to be alone*” (Genesis 2:18). We humans are not solitary creatures. We need each other.

Though we need each other now as much as ever, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago released a study several years ago that revealed that Americans today have fewer people in whom we can confide than did past generations. In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. By 2004, that number had dropped to two. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004. If that survey is accurate, one out of every four of us says we have no close friends—zero, none.³

Another recent survey asked various Americans how often they entertained guests for dinner. According to this survey, six percent of us say we entertain guests once a week. Twelve percent of us entertain guests more than once a month. Twenty-one percent of us entertain guests at least once a month. Thirty-seven percent of us entertain guests a few times a year. And twenty-four percent of us entertain guests for dinner rarely or never.⁴ I suspect that there’s quite a bit of overlap between the one-in-four of us who rarely asks anyone over to eat with us and the one-in-four of us who says we have no friends.

The award-winning documentary *Lost Boys of Sudan* follows the lives of young African refugees who start life anew in America after civil war destroyed their families in Sudan. These young men, most of whom are under 18 years old, struggled to survive in Africa where they faced lions and local militia . . . and they continue to struggle in America, where they face loneliness as they learn an entirely new way of life.

The film focuses on a particular group of boys who were relocated by the U.S. government into an apartment complex in Houston. After job training, several of the boys head into the workforce, trying to become self-supporting. In one scene, Peter Kon Dut goes out to lunch with two coworkers from his factory job. In heavily accented English, Peter tells them about his struggles in America:

² Adapted from Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 16-17.

³ Janet Kornblum, “Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One to Confide In,” *USA Today*, June 23, 2006.

⁴ “Snapshots,” *USA Today*, June 6, 2006, D1.

“I see different things in this month here. Everybody is busy. You can’t get friends. ‘Time is money,’ they say, but in Africa, there is no ‘time is money.’ Everybody is busy here. How am I going to find friends here? I feel like going back to Africa and saying, **“There are no friends [in America].”**”⁵

You’ll perhaps remember that I’ve suggested to you more than once that people *come* to church for many reasons, but they only *stay* for one . . . *friends*. This is a matter of no small consequence for our life together.

According to Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase, “In most communities, 40 to 60 percent of people have no church relationship. A majority of our neighbors on the streets where we live do not know the name of a pastor to call when they face grief. Most of our co-workers have a few close friends and a circle of acquaintances but do not know the sustaining grace that a church offers. Most of the families with whom we travel to our children’s soccer tournaments and band concerts, most of the students we meet from the university, and most of the people who repair our cars and serve us in restaurants do not have a forum where they learn about peace, justice, genuine repentance, forgiveness, love, and unmerited grace.”⁶

Bishop Schnase pointed out that although the need for friends in the community at large is enormous, “Church members [frequently] love each other so much that their lives are so intertwined and their interests so interwoven that church groups become impenetrable to new people. Closeness closes out new people who feel like outsiders looking in, and those on the inside don’t even notice. Church members feel content because their own needs are met.”⁷

“To become a vibrant, fruitful, growing congregation,” he continued, “requires a change of attitudes, practices, and values. Good intentions are not enough. Too many churches want more young people as long as they act like old people, more newcomers as long as they act like old-timers, more children as long as they are as quiet as adults, more ethnic families as long as they act like the majority culture in the congregation. We can do better.”⁸

Along this line, most, if not all, telephones these days have a feature called “speed dial.” This feature allows us to dial frequently-used numbers by pushing only one—or at most, two—number keys. As we consider friendship this morning, I wonder who’s on your speed dial list?

How does someone become sufficiently important to you to get on your speed dial list? Such relationships usually develop one-to-one or in small groups, and their development requires effort, commitment, honesty, vulnerability, kindness, and trustworthiness. Rick Warren wrote that friendships like this develop “when people get honest about who they are and what is happening in their lives. They share their hurts, reveal their feelings, confess their failures, disclose their doubts, admit their fears, acknowledge their weaknesses, and ask for help and prayer.”⁹ This is the “**love each other deeply**” part of our text.

When it comes to “**offering hospitality without grumbling**,” Bishop Schnase noted that “Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive, and care for those who are strangers so that they find a spiritual home and discover for themselves the unending richness of life in Christ. It describes a genuine love for others who are not yet

⁵ *Lost Boys of Sudan* (Principe Productions, 2003), directed by Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk.

⁶ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 19-20.

⁷ Schnase, p. 20.

⁸ Schnase, pp. 28-29.

⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 139.

a part of the faith community, an outward focus, a reaching out to those not yet known, a love that motivates church members to openness and adaptability, a willingness to change behaviors in order to accommodate the needs and receive the talents of newcomers. . . .

We, too, were once strangers to the faith, residing outside the community where we now find rich resources of meaning, grace, hope, friendship, and service. **You and I belong to the Body of Christ because of someone's hospitality.**¹⁰

In 1961, when Sam Rayburn, long-time Speaker of the House, learned that he had terminal cancer, he shocked Washington when he announced that he was moving back to his small hometown of Bonham, Texas. People said to him, "Mr. Sam, we have the finest medical facilities in the nation right here in D.C. Why go back to that little town?" And the Speaker replied, "Because in Bonham, Texas, they know if you're sick, and they care when you die."¹¹

So when you think about your phone speed-dial list, is there anybody on that list who is neither co-worker nor family nor church friend? Are there any non-work and non-family and non-church names on the back of your pocket calendar or phonebook? What might you do to improve that situation for the sake of God's Kingdom?

Miss Ellie was right about abundant, fruitful living when she said, "**You can't take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don't mix with love.**" It takes *time* to nurture relationships. It takes *time* to offer hospitality; and Rick Warren was right when he wrote that "**The best use of life is love. The best expression of love is time. The best time to love is now.**"¹²

Let's roll!

¹⁰ Schnase, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ J.R. Love, Rushton, Louisiana.

¹² Warren, p. 128.