

“Friends on the Way to Bethlehem”

*“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” (John 15:15).¹*

I feel certain that you’ve recognized the background for this week’s PowerPoint as having to do with the three fellows we know as “The Three Wise Men.” We don’t actually know much about them, and paintings depicting them imagine them in many different ways.

Many paintings show them as three “kings,” or, at the very least, very wealthy men; but I’m drawn to this picture of them that portrays them as less elevated, more excited, and perhaps a little more confused or uncertain.

Tradition (not the Bible) names them Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar, and whether these three guys lived together or worked together, I don’t know. But they obviously were all students of the heavens and of Jewish prophecy, and they seem to have been longing for God’s Messiah to come. And it took no little commitment to undertake such a long and dangerous journey, whether they were wealthy or not.

But for all the things we don’t know about these three, there’s one thing I believe we do know about them—they must have been good friends to have undertaken such a long and uncertain journey together. And as we, too, make a journey toward Bethlehem during this Advent season, I’d like to think with you this morning about friendship. I’m going to begin by talking about something that may not seem connected to friendship—at least not at first.

There have been very few inventions that have so quickly changed our lives, our behavior, and our friendships as have smart phones. The first iPhone went on the market just nine years ago—in 2007, and the first Android phone went on the market in 2008—and yet, can you even remember life without a smart phone?

We have moved quickly from a world in which people walk down the street looking at their surroundings, at other people, and carrying on face-to-face conversations, to a world in which it has become quite normal to see a group of people sitting at the same table and each ignoring the others while doing something on their smart phones. It’s fairly common now for people to walk into things or to be hit by cars as they walk along looking at their smart phones. And while I am very grateful indeed for all my iPhone can do, I think our phones are having some very harmful effects on our friendships.

A recent study of female students at Baylor University found that those women used their phones an average of ten hours a day, and they checked their phones 221 times a day, which is an average of every 4.3 minutes. And the researchers noted that these numbers probably underestimated the reality.²

Studies of conversation have shown that when two people are talking, the mere presence of a phone on the table or visible in peripheral vision changes what those persons talk about and diminishes the degree of connection they feel. With phones present, people limit their conversation to topics where they won’t be as disturbed if they are interrupted. There is little deep conversation. So even a silent, untouched phone disconnects us from one another.³

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 11, 2016, the third Sunday of Advent.

² Jacob Weisberg, “We are Hopelessly Hooked,” *The New York Times Review of Books* (February 25, 2016).

³ Sherry Turkle, “Stop Googling. Let’s Talk,” *The New York Times*, 9.26.2015.

Now I expect that most of us, if asked, would say that we have a lot of friends. I also suspect that what we really mean by that is that we have a lot of acquaintances—people we’ve met, and whose names we know, but whom we don’t really know in any substantial or deep way. I suppose that there are many ways by which we might try to gain a more accurate notion of how many real friends we have; and I’m going to suggest a fairly simple one.

Most, if not all, of those smart phones we use 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. So as we think about friends this morning, I wonder who’s on your speed dial list? More particularly, I wonder who’s on that list *who is neither co-worker nor family*? Is there anybody? There aren’t any non-family or non-co-worker names on my speed dial.

So how does someone become sufficiently important to you to get listed in your cell directory at all (I have 4,157), and how does someone become sufficiently important to you to get on your speed dial list (I have 9)? That’s what we’re going to wonder about together this morning.

Over the years, I’ve become fond of 1 Samuel 18:1, where we’re told that “*After David had finished talking with Saul, he met Jonathan, the king’s son. There was an immediate bond of love between them, and they became the best of friends.*” The friendship between David and Jonathan is legendary, and it’s an illustration of those extraordinary friendships we sometimes call “best friends.”

While Jill is my very, very best friend in every way, I have the names of seven men written beside that verse in my Bible. These are guys from nearly every chapter of my life, and I got a birthday gift this week from my very first best friend, who teaches New Testament at Truett Seminary of Baylor University, and he’s about to get a birthday gift from me. While I’m certainly grateful to have many more friends than these seven, these are guys who, if I called them and told them that I needed them, would be on the next plane to Baltimore—even if they’re not on my speed dial list.

These are guys—and of course Jill is like this, too—who remind me of the famous comment by George Eliot, “Oh, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away.”⁴ But in order to have friends like that, of course, we have to be a friend like that.

While the idea of friendship is somewhat hard to define, one author noted that, “first and foremost, friendship is not instrumental.”⁵ That is, friendship is not about what someone can do for us, but about who we become in each other’s presence. If there was a central theme in what people have said to me about Howard Love this week, is that he was this kind of friend to many, many people.

But although you and I need friends today as much or more as humans have ever needed friends, surveys indicate that perhaps as many as one out of every four of us says we have no close friends. That’s zero good friends. Zilch. None.⁶

⁴ http://www.azquotes.com/author/4431-George_Eliot/tag/friendship

⁵ Kate Murphy, “Do Your Friends Actually Like You?” *The New York Times*, 8.6.16.

⁶ Janet Kornblum, “Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One to Confide In,” *USA Today*, June 23, 2006.

One teacher had a group of boys write on one side of a piece of paper how they saw their own public image, or persona, and on the other side they wrote what they really felt like on the inside. They scrunched up the paper, threw the balls at each other, and then read what the others had written. They were all the same. On one side, each boy wrote something like “tough, fearless, leader of the pack.” On the other side, they all wrote something like, “lonely, sad, got no friends.”⁷ All of them.

I think I’ve told you this story before, but I like it, so I’m going to tell it again. 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, not far from Charleston. Jill and I set up housekeeping in an old slave’s house in Charleston, which is one reason I like this story.

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 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 from the chance to look in on the ‘old folks’ who were sick.

⁷ David Zahl, “Feministic Fallout,” Mbird blog (5.26.15).

“Child,’ she said, ‘you can’t take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don’t mix with love.’”⁸ Let me say that again: **“You can’t take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don’t mix with love.”**

Harvard University has long studied what makes human beings happy, and one study has been going on for well over seventy years. The director of the study summarized their discoveries pretty succinctly when he said, **“The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people.”**⁹

Jean Belton was one of our members in Bristol, and during her recovery from a broken ankle, I asked her, “How’s the walking going?” Jean’s answer was profound as she replied, **“How the walking goes depends on who’s walking with you.”**

If you don’t remember anything else this morning, remember these three things:

- 1. Shortcuts don’t mix with love.**
- 2. How the walking goes depends on who’s walking with you.**
- 3. The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people.**

According to Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase, forty to sixty percent of the people in most communities have no church relationship. Most of our neighbors have no one to call when grief touches their lives. Most of our co-workers have few, if any, close friends. Most of the families with whom we travel to soccer tournaments and band concerts, most of the students we meet at school, and most of the people who repair our cars or serve us in restaurants have no place to learn about peace, justice, repentance, forgiveness, love, and grace.¹⁰ They are going through CHRISTmas, and through life, alone.

Now it seems to me that people come to church for many different reasons, but they only stay for one reason, and that reason is **friends**. Hip hop artist Lecrae Moore has won several Dove Awards and a Grammy Award. His album, “Anomaly,” was the first album to ever top both the Gospel Albums and the Billboard 200 charts. But his life didn’t begin that way.

Growing up without a father, Lecrae filled his life with drugs, theft, alcohol, sex, and gang activity. He was so wild that his friends called him “Crazy Crae.” Lecrae Moore met Jesus because a white man named Joe was not afraid of him and loved him enough to enter his culture and learn to speak his language. And because he has a friend named Joe, Lecrae can now say, “The Way of Jesus is not just Truth. The Way of Jesus is the truth about everything.”¹¹

Demaryius Thomas is a wide receiver for the Denver Broncos, but his life started out pretty rough, too. Demaryius’s mother was sent to prison when he was 11. His stepfather and grandmother were also in prison, and his dad was away in the military. As he tells the story, “I was very fortunate to have multiple high school coaches who looked out for me. Multiple college coaches. Deacons. Pastors. Aunties. Uncles. Friends. If even one of those people had let me slip, would you know my name? Maybe not.”¹²

⁸ Adapted from Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 16-17.

⁹ Glen Stanton, *The Family Project* (Focus on the Family, 2014), pp. 299-300.

<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674059825>

¹⁰ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 19-20.

¹¹ Nancy Pearcey, *Finding Truth* (David C. Cook, 2015), pp. 252-253.

¹² Demaryius Thomas, “For Momma,” *The Player’s Tribune*, 11.16.15.

I think there's a message for us as a church in these stories. Students who graduate from high school, even those who've been active in youth ministry, are soon lost to the church in appalling numbers. Some research suggests that as many as 80 percent of church youth never really return to church after graduating from high school, and I think that number is low.

I think that a major reason why this happens is that youth don't have relationships with anyone in the church except other youth and the youth workers, so when they leave the youth ministry and scatter to various colleges and careers, there are very few people in their home congregation whom they know and who are their friends. And where there are few friendship connections, there are few connections of any sort, so they don't come back.¹³

My friends, you and I, too, were once outside the community of faith. There was a time for us, too, when we didn't know Jesus and when we didn't enjoy the richness of grace, hope, friendship, and service that we now find among God's people. You and I belong to the Body of Christ today because somebody—and probably lots of somebodies—cared about us in the past.

So after all this, when you think back to your speed-dial list, is there anybody on that list who is neither co-worker nor family nor church friend? Are there any non-work or non-family or non-church names on the back of your pocket calendar or phonebook? How are all those folks outside the community of faith going to find what we've found if we don't tell them about it?

Let me remind you of those three key ideas again:

- 1. Shortcuts don't mix with love.**
- 2. How the walking goes depends on who's walking with you.**
- 3. The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships with other people.**

When we think about nurturing relationships, I believe Rick Warren was right when he told us that "**The best use of life is love. The best expression of love is *time*. The best time to love is *now*.**"¹⁴

My friends, as we journey toward Bethlehem, let's be intentional about bringing with us some other folk who need to meet Jesus. He's not a baby any more. He changes lives, saves families, gives Hope, and transforms the world. Right here. Right now.

¹³ Joe Ball, "Lessons from a Hunter Education Course," *Western Recorder*, November 14, 2006, 5.

¹⁴ Warren, p. 128.