

## ***On Friendship***

Caroline Kittle, May 29, 2022

Good morning everyone! Thanks so much for being here and to El for presiding. I want to give a special warm welcome to any newcomers who might be joining us on zoom or in the room, and also a shout out to the young people in our youth groups who might be with the Roomies right now—I missed seeing you all today since I was sick.

At Blue Ocean, many of us grew up hearing about the stories of miracles in the Bible. But, if you didn't, you're in good company today because it wasn't until I was in my 30's that I heard about this one. It's one of the great miracles of Jesus that no one ever talks about: that he had...12 close friends in his 30's! (ha) I tried to tell a rambunctious group of 6th graders that one once, some years ago. They didn't laugh as hard as I did, but when they reach 30, they'll see.

Friendship truly is one of those great miracles that no one ever talks about. In our society, much is made of romantic love—particularly heteronormative love culminating in marriage. In Christianity, marriage has been likened to the relationship between Jesus and his oneness with the church body, his “Bride.” One of my favorite books of the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Songs, is all about love and longing. It never actually mentions God, but has long been read as a picture of God's love and intimate longing for God's people. In the Song of Songs chapter 5 there are some pretty racy lines about pounding hearts and dripping honey. But the chapter ends by saying, “This is my beloved and this is my friend.”

Friendship is key to romantic love. But friendship is also so much more than that. Our society divides people into Us and Them. But friendship has the power to overcome those divides. Friendships can abide within families. And the Proverbs say, **“There is a friend who sticks closer than family.” (Proverbs 18:24)**

Friendships can help us live longer, and the ones that end in loss or betrayal can truly break our hearts. At Blue Ocean, we often say that we need connection more than we need answers—connection with ourselves, with our world, and with God. Today, I'd like to emphasize the importance of connection by focusing on friendship.

When I was in the 5th or 6th grade youth group, I remember the teacher asking us to share something about ourselves that we were proud of, like a skill or a talent. I couldn't think of anything that I was really proud of about myself. No skills or talents came to mind. Not art. Not music. Not sports. This is my exaggerated memory, but as the other kids shared their perfect answers, our teacher's joy seemed to be fully reflected in his face. Then, my turn came. I frantically tried to think of something interesting about myself to share. Nothing. Nada. Then, I thought, wait, I have good friends, I love my friends, so I said, "Um, uh, I have friends?" (...) The teacher's face fell. He said that's not really what he was asking for. Now, I knew that my teacher always emphasized caring for the outcast and the vulnerable—we were in church after all. So, I remember having this feeling of shame, like maybe I had made the other kids feel bad by focusing on popularity which excludes the outcast and the vulnerable.

Of course, friendships based on wealth or popularity are fleeting and shallow. They quickly disappear when the going gets tough. But, there are many stories in the Bible of a powerful friendship-love that can disrupt the status quo. These examples of friendship-love gather in the outcast, uplift the vulnerable, and transform enemies into friends. Some examples! Many people understand God as this all-powerful being and we, his lowly creatures. But, there's another way to understand God: as a friend. Abraham is called "a friend of God," and Moses spoke with God "face to face as one speaks with a friend." In another Bible story, Jonathan is the son of King Saul, and supposed to be enemies with his father's biggest rival, David. But the story says, **"The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."** (1 Samuel 18:1) Later, the prophets Elisha and Elijah were from different generations, young and old. The younger says to the older: **"As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."** (2 Kings 2:2) Ruth and Naomi, a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law were from two opposing nations—Moab and Israel. And yet, Ruth says to Naomi: **"Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God."** (Ruth 1:16-17) This is the transformative power of friendship-love.

In the Gospel of John, Ch 15:12-17, Jesus tells his disciples to love one another as a reflection of his own friendship-love. (Zoomies, this should be in the chat and Roomies, on the bulletin.) Jesus says:

**“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you... I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from God. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” (John 15:12-17)**

It seems here that Jesus’s love is not so much like marriage, which we gotta admit is a nice analogy, lovely, but even more so, Jesus calls us Friend. And even though he calls God “Father,” he describes a mutual closeness with God, a friendship if you will, where everything is revealed and shared. This friendship-love does not remain between just two people like in a monogamous relationship. This kind of love is the greatest intimacy with God, but then extends to others like a vine that bears much fruit, going from one person to many. We are given this word so that we may love one another.

There’s a beautiful little proverb 27:19 that Jesus would have been familiar with that helps bring his teachings home. We’ll take a moment to look at two very different translations of this one proverb. The NRSV Updated Edition which just came out this month, says: **“Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another.” (NRSVUE)** Beautiful. But, then, the New American Standard Bible translation says it like this: **“As in water a face *reflects* the face, So the heart of a person *reflects the person.*” (NASB)** You with me so far?

Each translation carries a slightly different meaning and I wonder, is this proverb talking about reflecting the heart face-to-face as one speaks to a friend? Or is it describing an individual’s heart reflecting who they truly are? According to the French Rabbi Rashi, who has a full commentary on the Hebrew Bible, the words mean friend. **Rashi’s commentary says: “According to how much someone knows that their friend loves them, so they will show them their face.”**

I wonder, how might this beautiful little proverb on friendship and its powerful commentary by Rashi apply to our own lives?—that “According to how much someone knows that their friend loves them, so they will show them their face.” (pause)

My mom (who some of you might know as Diane Sonda or DiDi) has a friend like this—one who has stuck by her closer than family. A friend to whom she can reveal her truest self. My mom's friend has a daughter who became my life-long friend and one to whom I can reveal everything. Over the years, we made new, mutually beloved friendships that have transcended divisions of race, religion, orientation, and gender. So a close-knit friendship group has formed, and now includes her wife, actually all our partners, and all the kids—the next generation. I'm grateful for these friendships that have shown me how one steadfast connection can spread to others and enables us to reflect and reveal our truest selves to one another according to how much we know we are loved.

Jesus revealed everything to his friends, everything he heard from God, so go, he says, and love one another like that, as I have loved you. He says, "You did not choose me but I chose you." Love is a choice. The depth of our love allows our friends to show us their true face, so that we may see them and bear witness to them. This kind of friendship-love has great power to transform our entire world.

As we near the end, I want to take a brief look at friendship loss and betrayal. You see, Jesus gave this teaching to love one another at the Last Supper on the night before he died. He shared this meal with his 12 miraculous best beds. However, right before he commands them to love one another, he predicted that one friend would betray him and that another friend would deny him. When he finished his teaching about love, the story goes on immediately to describe the betrayal and the denial that Jesus knew was coming.

Now, I don't want to dwell on the grief of betrayal or loss of friendship for too long, because I know that this is a painful experience that too many have known. Studies show that Tylenol can help with this kind of pain. But, I do want to take a moment to acknowledge that these kinds of losses are a part of being a friend, and the consequence of loving others deeply. Betrayal and loss of friendship are forms of ambiguous loss. My dearest friend Sheila introduced me to this term. **Ambiguous loss** includes any kind of heartbreak or loss that is not clearly ritualized in our society, like in the ways that marriage, birth, and death are ritualized and honored. So, for example, loss of friends, breakups, betrayal, loss of functioning, mental illness, significant life changes, various transitions, rejection by one's family, and so on all might fall into the

category of ambiguous loss. These are the kinds of losses that might not get clear closure, and sometimes have little hope of making any sense at all.

David Kessler is an expert on grief and wrote a very helpful [article](https://lithub.com/our-experience-of-grief-is-unique-as-a-fingerprint/#:~:text=Each%20person's%20grief%20is%20as,or%20reframe%20it%20for%20them) in LitHub (<https://lithub.com/our-experience-of-grief-is-unique-as-a-fingerprint/#:~:text=Each%20person's%20grief%20is%20as,or%20reframe%20it%20for%20them>) that describes our experience of grief as being unique as a fingerprint. He writes that every one of us shares a need for our unique grief to be witnessed. Perhaps, Kessler means like water reflects the face, or like the heart of a friend to a friend. We don't need platitudes, silver linings, or bible quotes. We have a very human need to be seen and heard. We need connection. Kessler says this is "hardwired in us, since our emotions bind us to one another, and in these bonds is the key to our survival." David Kessler also writes that "our brains are equipped with mirroring neurons, which is why when the mother smiles, the baby smiles back." But, grief can be very isolating, because in our busy world, there is rarely time for people to truly sit with us and to be fully present with us in our loss. He says, "Every loss has meaning. And all losses are to be grieved—and witnessed." He also has a rule on pet loss, our beloved furry friends. I love this quote, he says: "If the love is real, the grief is real."

Just like romantic love, friendships can end in loss or even betrayal. But, as Proverbs say, there is a friend who sticks closer than family. This is the kind of friendship-love that I think Jesus has to offer and encourages us to share with one another. It's the kind of love the disciples gave Jesus, the kind that says, "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay." This is the kind of love that enables our friends to fully reveal to us their faces and their hearts. At Blue Ocean, this is the kind of connection that we seek because we believe that we need connection more than we need answers: connection to ourselves, to each other, and to God.

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Now we'll move into a time of meditation. We'll do a somewhat traditional meditation by focusing on our breath and simply witnessing our thoughts and our bodies. Considering the news of the past few weeks, we acknowledge that it might be challenging to settle your body and mind. Trauma can be defined as too much, too fast, too soon, or too much for too long and/or not enough for too long. We are aware that people with symptoms of mental illness are far more often victims of trauma and violence than they are perpetrators of harm. So, if you're struggling, you are not alone. Be gentle on yourself. If you can, try to get comfortable. Release any tension you might feel in your chest, your neck, your body. Feel your feet on the floor and the chair beneath you. Breathe in through your nose if you're able, and out. Close your eyes or gaze downward. Breath in and out. For two minutes, notice the coolness of the air as it enters your nose and fills your chest, and notice its warmth as it is released. Remember that babies, children, and people make noise. If a thought arises as you are focusing on your breathing, witness the thought. Just witness it. Don't judge the thought. Don't reject the thought. Don't let it consume you. Just witness the thought as it comes and goes. And when you're ready, gently return your attention back to your breathing.

I'll watch the time as we breathe bearing witness to ourselves and the world around us.

2 minutes. Let's begin.