

The Message for Jan 29, 2012

Reach Out

John 15:12-17

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Steve sat in his office trying hard to do his job, but his mind was miles away. Truth is his mind was lost in a maze of hurt, anger, and fear. As you might have guessed, Steve was not having a good day. For the past two months he had tried to mend his relationship with his wife, Tracy, but the fabric of their marriage continued to unravel.

That morning Tracy packed a bag and left for her parent's home. She needed time to think, she said. Steve was afraid she would never return, but he didn't know what to do. He desperately needed someone to talk with, but who?

The first person that came to mind was Charlie. Charlie was a guy in upper management. He had gone out of his way to befriend Steve when he joined the company a year ago. There was something about Charlie that made Steve feel comfortable in his own skin. He felt accepted and welcomed. He never felt he had to prove himself, as he did with some of his other friends. Steve trusted Charlie – who listened without judgment, could keep a confidence, and could offer some badly-needed wisdom.

Steve got up out of his chair, and headed for Charlie's office. He had no idea that Charlie had prayed for Steve that very morning, as Charlie had done almost every morning for the past year.

I wonder how many "Steves" there are out there in the world?
I wonder how many "Charlies" there are out there in the world?

Those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus are called to love as Jesus loved: completely, unconditionally, and sacrificially.

In our reading for today, we learn that Jesus expects us to love one another within the body of Christ, as member of his church. We are to practice loving one another in the church – so we can love our neighbors and our enemies with the love that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Jesus expects this from us. Listen to our reading from John's Gospel the 15th chapter.

(Read Text)

We continue our series called "Over the Fence." We are being called by Christ to reach over the fence into someone's life with God's grace and love and mercy and forgiveness. Last week we considered how we tend to see the people around us in one of three ways -- as scenery, as objects, or as people. And depending on how we see the people around us, we tend to treat them accordingly.

I ended worship last week asking you to invite someone to worship this week. For me that isn't hard to do for at least three reasons. First - it comes with my calling. Second - I get lots of opportunities to invite people. Third - it's a natural part of who I am.

Now I need to confess my success rate is probably only around 5%, if that. Most of the people I invite do not come. But I invite them anyway. I invite people because I am excited about seeing more and more people in worship, connecting with God and other disciples, and growing in the faith in this place. Today we added 14 new disciples to our mission and ministry here at Friedens.

Not only that but then Jesus sends us out to do -- to invite -- to evangelize -- to share God's grace and love with everyone we meet. We gather in here to share, to then go out there and share. Now -- I realize that for many of us that isn't easy to do. It stretches us way beyond our comfort zone. And we may not be sure what to do when we get out there.

One of our life-long disciples here at Friedens said to me this week. "Pastor I have been a member at Friedens all my life and I've never invited anyone to come to worship but you got me thinking about that. I began to wonder how to do that evangelism thing." Let's talk about our relationships with the people around us so we can do that evangelism thing.

Consider this - *a friendship is the primary bridge that Jesus uses to walk into someone's life through us.* I've seen it. I've experienced it. Jesus has walked into my life time and time again through the friends in my life.

We're talking about a special kind of friendship.

- It's not about preaching to people.
- It's not about having all the answers.
- It's not about converting or convincing.
- And it's certainly not about quoting Bible verses to point out how wrong people are.

It's about being like Charlie to the people around us. I'm convinced, there are far more "Steves" in the world than there are "Charlies." Jesus calls us to be the "Charlies."

The kind of friendship we are talking about looks like this:

- It's being a friend to someone, caring about them, walking with them.
- It's praying for them not preying on them,
- It's earning their trust and respect, seeing them as Jesus sees them.
- And it about being open to faith happening in us and through us -- not because we bring up the subject, but because they do. At least that's been my experience.

Jesus is our model. I'm amazed at how often he welcomed people into his life and loved them as they were and where they were. Jesus walked with them physically and spiritually on their journey of faith -- helping them, guiding them, empowering them to take responsibility for their own faith. Each one of us is responsible for our own faith development.

In Jesus' day, the relationship between a student and a rabbi was one of inferior to superior, but notice how Jesus takes a different approach. He said to his disciples: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends. You did not choose me but I chose you."

Jesus chose you – to be his friend. He initiates the relationship.

My wife Amber chose me. Of all the men in the world she chose me. Don't ask me why. Can I tell you how that makes me feel? I am someone special in her eyes. And I chose her. She is someone special in my eyes. We chose each other and we continue to choose each other. Our relationship started with a conversation and the word, "Hello." All friendships begin that way. We continue to be friends first and foremost. From that first conversation our relationship continues to grow stronger and stronger everyday through the good and bad, the happy and sad. That's how it is with Jesus too.

Consider these seven qualities about the kind of friendships Jesus calls us to have with one another. This is the kind of friendship Jesus has with us.

1. **Acceptance:** We are all a work in process. God loves each one of us as we are, but God also loves us too much to leave us that way! We share God's love as we accept others as they are no matter how "unfinished" they appear to be.
2. **Time:** Friendship, like good wine, takes time to cultivate. Real friends spend time together regularly. That's why we meet here regularly for worship, LIFE Groups and ministry opportunities.
3. **Kindness:** Small acts of kindness are the currency for real friendship. Sometimes a simple "thank you" will do.
4. **Affirmation:** In a world that seems to delight in tearing down people, real friends lift up one another with words of genuine affirmation, reflecting back to people the gift of God they truly are.
5. **Authenticity:** Be yourself. The world tends to think that Christians are fake. Prove them wrong. Be real. Be comfortable with who God created you to be.
6. **Transparency:** Most of us are afraid that people will reject us if we allow our faults and follies to be exposed. The opposite is true. Being open about our joys and our sorrows, our strengths and our weaknesses, communicates trust in a friendship and honors our friend.

7. Forgiveness: Real friends will disappoint us and step on our toes from time to time. We reflect God's love when we forgive our friends as God forgives us.

This is the kind of friendship we have in Jesus. This is the kind of friendship we're called to have with those around us. This is the kind of friendship that communicates the presence of Christ at work in our lives. This is the kind of friendship that serves as a bridge for Jesus to walk into the lives of those around us. This is the kind of friendship that makes life possible...

I saw one of our neighbors in the hallway at the hospital one day this past week. I simply asked the question how are you doing? And then I listened for 20 minutes. He shared how he needs to make a career change. He talked about his relationship struggles. He talked about how the rest of his family is going to church and it's making an obvious difference in their lives. But he just didn't feel a connection with the church. After 20 minutes or so I made the invitation something like, "You are more than welcome to come to Friedens sometime. I think you might find it helpful." He said, "Thanks, I might just do that." As I turned to walk away he said, "Oh and thanks for sharing. You're a good friend." One question, two ears and an invitation...

Can you imagine what could happen if each one of us, would reach over the fence into someone's life with the love and grace of God through a genuine friendship?

Can you imagine the "Steves" in the world who might discover real hope and real peace and real joy through us because we are willing to be the bridge for Jesus to walk into their lives?

Can you imagine inviting more and more people to come here to Friedens to be empowered and equipped for God's life-changing mission in the world?

Jesus commands us to love one another -- I believe he meant it. So let's go do it completely, unconditionally, and sacrificially. The same way he loves us. Amen.