

Valentine's Day this year was Ash Wednesday. And after Ash Wednesday, I went on a continuing education week in the mountains, and so was sermon writing, reading and leading an enneagram retreat for a friend in Highlands. Since I was driving a good bit, I heard a radio segment offering a twist on the typical Valentine's Day story. It was a young mom celebrated the intimacy of her closest friendship. She was married and so had a traditional valentine. But this year, she wanted to honor the emotional connection and closeness of her best friend.

The segment was meant to be forward thinking, somewhat edgy as a piece. And I suppose it was alternative – offering a pathway for celebration outside of a romantic relationship. However, I didn't find the idea of deep affection found in friendships as particularly *fresh or new*. **And that's because I read the Bible.** Our holy scripture is absolutely **full** of examples of deep and abiding and life changing friendships. Maybe you have some of these pairs in mind already. Who are your favorite buddies from the Bible?

Are you thinking of Paul and Silas, those great church planters and traveling companions who made it all around the Mediterranean sea together. And this was before tour guides and travel agents, quick wicking clothing and comfortable shoes, a testimony to the strength of their relationship for sure.

And what about Shiprah and Puah, the pair of midwives from the Exodus. They were colleagues, delivering babies around Egypt. But their fear of God and their friendship moved them outside of their professional roles. They relied on each other when they began to defy Pharaoh's order to murder the Hebrew sons.

Certainly, the disciples of Jesus were the deepest of friends. Leaving work and family life to invest in a common identity and sacred community. Do you remember of the two disciples walking the Emmaus Road after Jesus' crucifixion? They were sharing their pain and shock at the news, exploring their grief together. When suddenly, Jesus appeared to them and in the breaking of bread their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

Not all friendships shown in the Bible are exemplary. The entire book of Job explores how his friends fail him after his losses. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar leave much to be desired in the way of compassionate care for the grieving, but I guess we can say they tried, and in the end, they all learn something more about God.

The story of David and Jonathan is rather radical model for friendship. Maybe you are familiar with this one? Jonathan is the son of Israel's King, Saul, and David is Saul's rival. Scripture tells us their relationship trumps the familial bond of the father and son when Jonathan protects David by warning him about his father's plans. In the end at Jonathan's death, David says this friend has meant more to him than any other person or relationship. "I grieve for you Jonathan," David says, "you were very dear to me."

Our Old testament passage for today offers yet another example of scripture's attention to non-traditional relationships. The story of Naomi and Ruth begins with the problem of famine. Naomi moves with her husband and two sons to Moab to find more food. Terribly, the husband and two adult sons die, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth widowed, disoriented and in deep need.

But when Naomi hears there is food back in her hometown, she decides to return to Bethlehem. She tells her daughters in law not to come with her. Naomi cannot provide for them and because of her age will have no more sons that they might marry through the customs of levirate marriage. It would be better for them to stay in their homeland to start again, and so she releases them from any familial obligation.

Naomi in her grief is convincing. One of the women follows Naomi's plan; but, the other, Ruth decides to stick with Naomi. As Dr. Brent Strawn of Duke Divinity says in his commentary on working Ruth *clings* to Naomi. This is a term used in other Old Testament texts in the contexts of profound love, inalienable possession, and unshakable commitment. In her well known lines that we read this morning, Ruth says in language that is powerful, poetic, and lines out nicely in parallel lines like the best of Hebrew poetry:

"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried."

Amen.

These powerful friendships from our holy book serve as an important reminder. Unlike relationships mandated by society or contracted institutionally, or built up by bloodlines, the bonds between Ruth and Naomi, Jonathan and David, Paul and Silas, Shiprah and Puah transcend the prescribed roles. The connections are unexpected, not obligatory. And so, the commitment, care and love shared among friends are truly a delight, as they are always a gift.

Recently, Justin and I brainstormed around an application to Candler School of Theology's *Young Adult Innovation Hub*. It's a cohort of congregational teams chosen through an application process that will learn, develop, test and implement new approaches to ministry with young adults. If we are selected, decisions are made in May and stretch across denominations, we would create a team of all ages to engage in a series of education and participatory experiences leading to the development of novel ministry ideas, funded by the grantors. We appreciate your prayers.

My energy for and interest in the project started with the idea of uncovering rituals for the developmental stages of the 21st century young adult. Scripture gives us many, different examples of a life lived in Christ.

But the church offers its blessings through ritual and routine for a very specific set of milestones.

Churches have ceremonies for marriage, membership, baptism, death. But if people are no longer getting married at the same rate and aren't as into joining - and don't forget the birth rate is getting lower and lower - doesn't the church still have something to say? Is there an opportunity for communal prayer and support through liturgy and ritual when people do things like move in together, or adopt a child, or are promoted in their jobs? What is the role of the pet blessings in our liturgical life? And I wondered about solidifying a faith-based ceremony around friendships too.

However, the more I study friendships in the Bible, the less I'm looking for a ritual to celebrate them. Because you see, rituals are by definition - routine. The same words are spoken; the same actions are taken; time and time again. The moves are made in a repetitive manner so that meaning is solidified and continuity cemented. But scripture reminds us that friendships exists outside these institutionalized lines. Friendship flourishes as a surprise. Friendship is a gift.

You'll know what I mean. Having a friend is answering a chance call on a random Tuesday for a cup of coffee that turns into an afternoon chat. It's the spur-of-the-moment weekend gathering that becomes an epic fishing trip with stories that last forever. It's the thoughtful gift that comes out of the blue and was meant just for you. It's the hug and the visit and the tears and the food that find you in the ash heap of grief. It's words of accountability when you need it, and weren't able to hear the correction from anyone else. Friendship is a gift. And so, we do not look to ritual to strengthen it, but we look to God with grateful hearts, when we are blessed with the experience of friends.

At the end of his life, in the Gospel of John, Jesus addresses his disciples as friends. In this moment he is facing his death, aware of his approach to the cross, and when his hour had come he could have chosen to address the disciples in so many different ways.

Jesus might have said something like, "Listen up. I am the Alpha and Omega. And what will be, will be. You will be my witnesses at the end." Or maybe he would have landed on "God is my father and I am the son. And your place in the hierarchy of authoritative structure looks like that of children." He could have

said one of those more mysterious things, something like “I am the sheepfold, I am the gate, I am the vine and you are the branches.” One of those things that would have left the disciples wondering what exactly this meant and what they meant to him.

But no, in the last gathering of Jesus and the 12, Jesus said, “You are my friends.” And No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

What a surprise! What a gift! That Jesus would take on flesh and yes even taste death because he loved us and called his friends.

For this we are truly grateful. Thanks be to God.
Alleluia. Amen.