

December 11, 2016 (Third Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: 2 Peter 1:12–21

TITLE: What Friends Said About Jesus

By Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Welcome to East Liberty Presbyterian Church. If this is your very first time in our church, let me help you with some of the vocabulary of worship here. You are seated in the sanctuary with a chancel up front and a narthex or entryway in the back. The center is called the apse with the side sections called transepts, and the entire sanctuary is in the shape of a cross. During worship we will talk a lot about faith and the gospel. Faith is not so much what you believe with your head about God, but what you trust in your heart about God. Even if you've only got a mustard seed amount of that faith, that's enough. And when we mention the gospel, that refers to the story of Jesus Christ - something we call the good news. This story comes to us from the bible and from what has been handed down through the centuries by church members. You don't have to understand everything about Jesus to be a Christian. In fact, you probably won't understand everything in one lifetime. But learning about him and trusting him brings healing to your soul now and strength for life's journey ahead. I hope that was helpful. No need to thank me—as they say, what are friends for?

That last comment was not a throwaway line. Friendship is at the heart of Christian faith and life. It's the primary way Jesus described his relationship with his followers. In John 15, Jesus said: *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, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.* (John 15:15-16) We are not called to be slaves, lowly servants without power; neither are we called to be masters, oppressing and dominating others; but rather we are called to be friends—peers—ones who look each other in the eyes with others' best interests in our hearts.

Cole Porter's 1934 musical *Anything Goes* brings together Reno Sweeney, an evangelist turned nightclub singer, and a two-bit gangster named Moonface Martin (who proudly introduces himself as Public Enemy no. 13). The two of them sing a famous song about friendship, which starts out with these lyrics: *If you're ever in a jam, here I am. If you ever need a pal, I'm your gal. If you ever feel so happy you land in jail, I'm your bail. It's friendship, friendship, just a perfect blendship. When other friendships have been forgot, ours will still be hot.*

Think about someone who's been a good friend to you. Friends are people we trust, who will always give us a straight answer, who want what's best for us just as we want what's best for them. Friendship is built upon conversations—times of sharing, laughing, remembering, of straight talk heart to heart. And in a real

way, Christian faith is also built on friendship—straight talk about things that matter with people we care about.

Most of Jesus' followers came to be his disciples because some friend of theirs told them about Jesus. Andrew heard Jesus preach one day and then ran home and told his brother Simon Peter, "We have found the Messiah"; and that conversation resulted in the first two disciples of Christ. Philip did the same thing with his friend Nathaniel, and suddenly there were two more. Friends told their friends about this teacher who healed and spoke with power, and soon the crowds following Jesus filled the hillsides wherever he preached. More friends told other friends about Jesus, which led to people lining the road into Jerusalem, waving branches and laying down their robes on Palm Sunday. And after his tragic death on a cross, friends who saw the risen Christ told lots of others what they'd seen. That verbal sharing between friends led to the first Christian believers, to the New Testament writings, and to the church universal including all of us here today in this sanctuary.

In a very real way, the existence of the church 100 years from now is not dependent on the Pope in Rome or the Presbytery office on Allegheny Avenue or the bricks and mortar of this building. The future existence of the church is dependent on you and I telling our friends about Jesus—telling our friends not only that we go to church, but that we daily seek to follow the one talked about in church. Because, to paraphrase Moonface Martin, *when other friendships have been forgot, this one will still be hot.*

That's why in the little book of 2 Peter, the verses channel the voice and spirit of the apostle Peter, one of Jesus' best friends, and we hear Peter say to us, *Look, I intend to keep reminding you of these [gospel] things—to refresh your memory, so that when I'm not here any longer, you will be able to recall everything.* Friends don't let other friends forget what's important. We tell each other stories; we remind each other of what we've seen and know to be true. We help one another make sense of the world today and make plans for tomorrow. It's what friends do.

Now when Peter reminds us about Jesus, he doesn't go into a lot of detail. He doesn't list off a bunch of Christian doctrines or recite a long creed. He doesn't give us a lot of scientific data or empirical proofs. In this passage, Peter simply reminds us that he saw something wonderful in Jesus. As he put it, "we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." That's it. Either you accept that word or you don't. The most common starting point in sharing the gospel is always an affirmation that there is something real about God, about God's glory, God's presence in our world and plans for our world; and that we glimpse all this in Jesus. Peter said, *I was an eyewitness to majesty and glory in Jesus; I heard a voice declaring "This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. And all that we saw has been a lamp shining in a dark place for us.* With those words, Peter invites us to move out of the shadows and simply take one step forward into the light. That's

basically what it means to have faith—to choose to stand in the light and listen, ponder, and pray about what others have told us they believe to be true: that God in Christ and the Holy Spirit is love and near to each one of us now and always. If you’ve gone to a class reunion, or if you’ve taken part in a gathering of old friends who haven’t seen one another in a while, a common reaction is that it feels like no time has elapsed—you were able to pick up conversations broken off years before and go forward as if nothing had changed. Friendships affect how we experience time—and so does faith, when faith is lived out as part of a church. The sociologist Robert Bellah calls groups like us “communities of memory.”¹ Our coming together as a church changes the way we experience time. We don’t experience time as simply a continuous flow of events, passing by moment by moment. No - for us every day, every week, every year is punctuated by glimpses of the sacred amidst the routine and the profane. Prayer breaks into our daily life, perhaps before a meal or before going to sleep. Scripture and religious stories become part of our weekly repertoire of learning. Conversations and actions happening Monday through Saturday are shaped by a sense that God is near and our neighbor truly is our neighbor, a companion who is an equal part of God’s good creation. And just in case we forget these things, church friends—faith friends—will remind us. They check on us when we go astray. They hold us when death or tragedy happens. They pray for us and pray with us, when we don’t have the words to speak ourselves. They jog our memories and lift our spirits when we forget how special we truly are and how precious life is.

Peter is a persistent friend, one who said *I intend to keep reminding you of these things*. He wants to ensure we become active participants in communities of memory, like this one. Why? Because the things you need for this life—the deep things, like forgiveness (because we’ve all messed up), like hope (because some days it’s just hard to get out of bed), like having trust in the fundamental goodness of things here on earth—none of that can be gained from being a passive observer outside a faith community. Neither life nor faith is intended to be a spectator sport, and religious channel surfing poorly serves both God and you.

So Peter and other friends tug us on the sleeve and say, “Come and see. We have found the Messiah.” Good friends remind us, persistently, “There is more to life than just what you see around you right now. I know it.” Church friends honestly share with us the good news of Jesus: how in him, through him, in ways that inevitably surpass our full understanding, majestic glory has been glimpsed here on earth. In the good news shared with us about Jesus Christ, a lamp now shines in what was before a very dark place. Trust the light and trust the God-story it illuminates. Listen to your friends and for heaven’s sake, literally, be a faith-full friend to someone else.

AMEN

¹ Robert Bellah, Habits of the Heart, p. 282.