

BLOOM: Harvesting Good Friendships

Galatians 6:1-3, 7-10 (MSG)

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“In Christ, friendship is sharing burdens and working for the good of all.”

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WATCH/LISTEN: fbcjc.org/sermon/bloom-harvesting-good-friendships

¹⁻³ Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day's out. Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.

⁷⁻¹⁰ Don't be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he will harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others—ignoring God!—harvests a crop of weeds. All he'll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life. So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.

OPENING // Iconic Friendships

A couple of weeks ago, I asked my Facebook friends to name some iconic friendships from movies, TV shows, cartoons, and even real life. And they named some great ones. Perhaps some of these will ring a bell for you.

- Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, the original Star Trek
- David and Jonathan in the Bible
- Harry, Hermione, and Ron in the Harry Potter series – and honorable mention, Neville Longbottom.
- George and Lennie from “Of Mice and Men”
- DJ Tanner and Kimmy Gibler from Full House
- Jonny Quest and Hadji
- Thelma and Louise
- Calvin and Hobbes
- George Bush and Michelle Obama
- Laverne and Shirley (Honorable mention, Lenny and Squiggy)
- Lucy and Ethel
- Frodo and Sam from Lord of the Rings
- And so many more I don't have time to mention.

As you can see, examples of iconic friendships are plentiful and varied. We resonate with different friendships for different reasons, but often it is because we see something in their relationships that we long for in our own. Maybe we don't want to drive off the edge of the Grand Canyon together after committing a series of crimes like Thelma and Louise, but we would love a friend who stands by our side when life is hard and messy.

The other question I asked on Facebook was "*what creates a healthy friendship?*" And here are some of those responses in order of frequency.

- Trust, Honesty, Loyalty through the ups and downs
- Being real without fear of rejection, safe to be vulnerable
- Supportive yet willing to call you out in love
- Good Communication
- Tolerance of each other's weaknesses
- Shared life experiences and interests
- Mutual support and mutual respect
- Laughter

We all need a friend. It is why friendship is the theme of countless shows, movies, songs, and books, and why we resonate so deeply with those stories. During our current sermon series, *BLOOM: Cultivating Life-Giving Relationships*, we've been talking about how God is a relational God who knitted us together with a need for relationships – relationships with our Creator and relationships with others. And when those relationships are healthy, they are life-giving. And when they are unhealthy, they can be life-draining. We've all had experiences with both kinds of friendships, and, if we're honest, we've been both types of friends.

Cultivating healthy friendships take work. Harvesting good friendships take time and intention.

Our late pastor, Doyle Sager, often shared lessons from the farm where he grew up in Albany, Mo. He once spoke about harvesting stating the law of the harvest goes like this:

1. **We harvest the same as we sow.** A farmer would never plant corn and expect wheat to crop up.
2. **We harvest more than we sow.** I learned the hard way last year how big one little zucchini plant can get and how much it can produce.
3. **We harvest later than we sow.** We have to plant before we can expect a harvest. Purchasing and planting seed isn't an expense, it is an investment.

Ultimately, the law of the harvest is this: we reap what we sow. What we plant now impacts what blooms tomorrow. Whether we are talking about corn or zucchini, roses or relationships, the law of the harvest applies.

The Apostle Paul knew this law and reminded the believers in the town of Galatia about this law in his letter to them, the letter where our text comes from today. While we call it a book in our Bible, Galatians is really an epistle, which means a letter. In this case, it is a letter from the

Apostle Paul to Jesus believers in the city of Galatia. Paul had planted the church, taught them in the ways of Christ, and moved on to do the same in new cities. After Paul would leave, it was common for false teachers and sometimes intentional instigators to come in behind him and counter some of what Paul had been teaching, often confusing the new Christians. Word would eventually get to Paul, either through reports or from letters from these confused Christians asking Paul to clarify what was true, and that is the context for our letter today.

In his letter to the Galatians, we learn one of the main issues happens to be whether the non-Jewish believers, called Gentiles, needed to follow all the same laws and rituals of the Jewish believers. Paul said, “no”. The instigators said, “Yes”. Paul, with passion and anger, reiterates in his letter what he has been saying since he was forever changed by his encounter with Christ – only faith in Christ can save. Laws cannot save. Behaviors and rituals are not the remedy for sin. Paul knows his righteousness; his goodness comes not from his Jewishness or his adherence to Jewish law. It comes only as a free gift from Christ for all who believe. To add any other conditions or litmus tests to salvation completely voided the Gospel message of grace and excluded what God meant to include, and Paul would not tolerate it.

Paul wanted the Galatians to grab hold of their freedom in Christ, living no longer shackled to the law. But this freedom, a generous gift from God, did not mean they were no longer bound to anything. Paul says, as People of the Spirit, as Christ followers, they were no longer bound to the law, but now they were bound to Christ and to one another in love. Freedom in Christ brings responsibility for the welfare of others and it’s how we fulfill the law of Christ, the law of love. Our text today focuses on what it means to be bound to one another in love, particularly in the sharing of burdens and working for the good of all.

Lesson from the Elephantsⁱ

A few years ago, I heard author Jen Hatmaker speak, and she told a very moving story I think of often. Her friend, Nicole, sent her this picture and a story – a story about female elephants. You know, as all good stories begin. In the wild, when a mama elephant is giving birth, all the other female elephants in the herd back around her in formation. They close ranks so that the delivering mama cannot even be seen in the middle. They stomp and kick up dirt and soil to throw attackers off the scent and basically act like a pack of crazies.

They surround the mama and incoming baby in protection, sending a clear signal to predators that if they want to attack their friend while she is vulnerable, they'll have to get through 40 tons of female aggression first. Good luck with that.

When the baby elephant is delivered, the sister elephants do two things: they kick sand or dirt over the newborn to protect its fragile skin from the sun, and then they all start trumpeting, a female celebration of new life, of sisterhood, of something beautiful being born in a harsh, wild world despite enemies and attackers and predators and odds.

Scientists tell us female elephants normally take this formation in only two cases - under attack by predators like lions, or during the birth of a new elephant.

After sharing this story, Jen said, 'this is what we do, girls. When our sisters are vulnerable, when they are giving birth to new life, new ideas, when they are under attack, when they need their people to surround them so they can create, deliver, heal, recover...we get in formation. We close ranks and literally have each other's' backs.

And when delivery comes, when new life makes its entrance, when healing finally begins, when the night has passed and our friend is ready to rise back up, we sound our trumpets because we saw it through together. We celebrate! We cheer! We give thanks.

This is what Paul is calling the Galatians to do with one another – to close ranks around the vulnerable, the fallen, the hurting, not close ranks against them. Paul says where there is brokenness in others and in relationships, restoration happens through bearing burdens together. ²*Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.*

Perhaps these early believers were also familiar with Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, reminding them, *"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken."* *A herd of female elephants is not quickly broken. A friendship among those free in Christ is not quickly broken.*

When I asked people on Facebook about what creates a healthy relationship, as I mentioned earlier, the most frequent responses were honesty, loyalty through the ups and downs, a relationship that is safe to be vulnerable and real without fear of rejection. Mindy Caliguire writes, "When a friendship is going beyond ordinary levels of intimacy and moving into more spiritual territory, two ... areas become important to share with a soul friend: our areas of struggle and, even more specifically, our areas of wrongdoing. Soul friends share the joys of life as well as the struggles, and their ability to both divulge and respond to a confession opens the door to radical transformation."ⁱⁱ We all long for these kinds of friendships, a herd that will surround us when we are birthing new things, cheering us on; a herd that will surround us when we are wounded, needing support and healing; a herd that will surround us even when our struggles are of our own making. We need these kinds of friends. We also all need to be these kinds of friends.

When the elephants form that circle, the elephant in the center of the circle is not always the same elephant. When they are in need, they are, but when they are not, they join the outer circle to cheer on the sister who is now in need of celebration or kick up dirt for the sister now in need of care. Sharing in each other's burdens means sometimes we are **in** the circle and sometimes we **are** the circle. Sometimes we are sowing love, sometimes we are receiving love. We all need to experience both places, yet some of us desperately avoid being in the center,

afraid of being a burden or needy. And some of us camp out in the center, laying down and refusing to get back up or owning our part in our healing. If we are always sowing love but never receiving it, we miss out on life-giving relationships. If we are always receiving love but never sowing it, we miss out on life-giving relationships. This is the law of the harvest. Friendships are gifts because it is with good friends that we become good people. We don't learn to love, to share, or to be kind and considerate single-handedly. We acquire these virtues in relationship with others who are seeking them with us, and together we bloom.

In my own friendships, I've learned I tend to want to get lost in the outer circle, avoiding at all costs being in the center, the one in need. There is a lie so many of us believe that to be in need is to be a burden. I am thankful God has gifted me with some beloved friends who have taught me otherwise. They've taught me as I've watched them sow love and receive love in their relationships with others, and I've learned by how they've sown love in me – sometimes kicking me out of the circle to the middle when I won't move there myself. What a gift to be able to receive love. What a gift to be able to sow love in them.

Paul says your freedom in Christ, this generous gift God has given you, is not a license to live however you please. God has set you free from sin and the law, so you might be free to be loved and to be love. To be fully known and secure in God's love for you, and to love others empowered by God's Spirit alive in you. This law of Christ; the law of self-sacrificial love sourced from God's own love in us, is a holy investment that will reap the kinds of relationships and friendships God desires for each of us.

BENEDICTION:

Go now into the world and cultivate love,
nourished by the love of God,
rooted in the grace of Christ,
planting seeds of goodness through the Holy Spirit.
Amen

ⁱ <https://www.thewellteam.com/blog-posts/findyourelephanttribe>

ⁱⁱ M. Caliguire. *Spiritual Friendship*. as quoted in "Christian Reflection: A series in Faith and Ethics: Vol 27". Waco: The Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University, 2008.