March 5, 2016 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Ephesians 4:25-32 & Luke 6:31 Can We Be Friends, by Andy McDonald

Last week Jeff did a great job sharing with us about how they work and how important personal relationships are for our lives. And then Albert sang that great song he wrote about us making a promise to always love each other.

This is really critical, here. I believe it’s important for Christians everywhere but we’ve set our sights on an incredibly valuable and important mission. Our mission, the core thing we’ve decided we are about as the Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church, is “Loving People Into A Lifelong Friendship With God!”

Maybe this is why we decided that whole subject of Interpersonal Relationship deserved a little more than just one week’s sermon attention.

Talk about a relational intent, a relational focus, a relational mission that’s us: Loving-implies relationship and if there’s any doubt it evaporates when we say “Loving People.” That’s a call to a relational life.

Last week Jeff said “We are better with someone than alone” some of you aren’t too sure. But it is true even if doesn’t always feel like it. Before sin, Prior to the fall. In the perfect paradise of God’s creation. God himself looks at the perfection all around, his creation he has declared good each day, and in that perfect place he declares that something, one thing is not good. He looks at this first man Adam and he says “It is not good for man to be alone!” Aloneness is not our destiny. Aloneness can feel so bad and debilitating because we were not made to be alone. Even before we were sinful it was not good to be alone.
The eternal God, for all eternity, exists in relationship- Father Son and Holy Spirit. In the vast universe we know and beyond our knowing Father Son and Spirit are not alone.

Our mission doesn’t just say we love people but we love people into a lifelong friendship with God.

So we have relationships, we establish relationships that we might love people and not just so they can enjoy our love but that our loving them might enable and assist in being part of bringing them into a lifelong friendship with God.

A couple of weeks ago I told you about one of my wishes. I said, I wish for a shared life experience so we can know one another and care for one another in this local Body of Christ.

Passing in the hall on Sabbath morning, and sitting in corporate worship, while we all are united in worship and identify with the same message and music and scripture—important as that is, and I believe it is of primary importance—being in a corporate large group service of worship is way different than sharing our stories, sympathizing with one another, and meeting one another’s needs, and encouraging each other in our life of following Jesus.

Unfortunately we’ve too often glorified the whole standing alone thing. We used to sing in maybe the Junior class, “Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone.” And we must be willing to stand alone when circumstances call for us to do so. When the opportunity for Christian fellowship is denied us by some life circumstances, but that is not the norm.

Daniel took a stand but he did it praying with his three friends. Jesus himself hangs on the cross alone, but the night before he ate with his friends, and then prayed with them and took his closest three friends, Peter, James and John and spent time with them in the garden.
Sure there are deserts of aloneness that occur but the celebrated end is a return to fellowship. After 40 days in the desert, facing temptation, Jesus is ministered to by angels.

We need each other. And as part of this journey two weeks ago I made the appeal that we need to have opportunity in our schedule to be together sharing our stories, sympathizing with one another, and meeting one another’s needs, and encouraging each other in our life of following Jesus.

The survey we took two weeks ago was to try and ascertain what would happen, how would we adapt with a return to having our two corporate worship experiences sandwich an opportunity of classes for all of us.

This would mean starting our services a half hour earlier and ending a half an hour later.

The surveys seem to indicate that you too sense this need for connections outside of the worship service. The opportunity to share more of life together. 15 people noted interest in starting a class with another 30 or so willing to help with classes.

The reactions were overwhelmingly positive so we will be making this move. Stay tuned for exact start dates, we will have a plan in your hands next week.

Last week when Jeff said that we are better with someone than alone it reminded me of Ecclesiastes 4: 9& 10 where the wise man writes: “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.”

What makes a person, just a random person out there in society, what transitions that person from stranger to our friend? What is it that we do to create that mysterious and valuable bond of friendship?
I turned 16 the summer before I went off to boarding academy for my Junior year in high school. The school was only a couple of hours from my home. I was excited about attending. The daunting thing was that I really hardly knew anyone at the new school. I remember having a conversation with the chaplain. His name was John Strickland. I remember asking him how to break into the already existing circles of relationships and make friends. His answer was as profound as it was simple. He looked at me and said, “Andy, if you want to have friends you must show yourself friendly.”

He might have said attend to people.
He might have reminded me of some of the one another texts:
- Be devoted to one another—Romans 12:10
- Live in harmony with one another—Rom 12:16
- Love one another—Rom 13:8
- Accept one another—Rom 15:7
- Instruct one another—Rom 15:14
- Greet one another—Rom 16:16
- Agree with one another—1 Cor 1:10
- Serve one another—Gal 5:13
- Be patient with one another—Eph 4:2
- Be kind and compassionate to one another—Eph 4:32
- Forgive one another—Eph 4:32
- Submit to one another—Eph 5:21
- Admonish one another—Col 3:16
- Encourage one another—1 Thes 5:11

These are some really good instructions about how to show ourselves friendly. Really it seems that the whole friendship thing should be easy, and while it may be at times it isn’t always. Because if we are to be the friend to sticks closer than a brother there will be times when being friends isn’t light and fun.
Charlie Brown says, “Listen Linus, friendship isn’t about who you’ve known the longest. It’s all about the friend who comes and stands by your side in bad times.”

If it is true, as I believe scripture indicates, that two are better than one, how do we be a friend? What is it that a friend does?
In my life friends have really done two primary things. There’s a whole laundry list of things friends have done, ways they have loved me but they always involved some setting aside of their life for mine.
The challenge of loving people is the reality of what David Benner writes:
“Love always involves not just saying yes to someone but also saying no to self. The life of love is a life of death to the kingdom of self.”
Benner, Surrender to Love, p. 91

The two things I’ve most valued from friends have been their listening to me and asking me challenging probing thoughtful questions.

When was the last time you felt someone really listened to you? Of all the things needed in our world of noise and chatter is not just to be heard but to be listened to! When we look up the meaning of the word “listen” it has a connection to paying attention to sound.

So seriously, when was the last time you really felt someone was focused on listening to you?

What did they do? How did you know they were listening?
Maybe they looked at you. It’s hard to believe someone is paying attention and really listening to us if they don’t look at us.

If we think about it our friends look at us when we are talking. They put down their phone, they stop texting, they stop looking over our shoulder to what’s behind us, they put off interruptions, and they focus on us, they give us the one thing we have to give, they give us their attention.
Psychologists tell us that emotionally we humans, when listened to, feel loved.

Wow! let that sink in with reference to our mission of loving people into a lifelong friendship with God. Some of us worry about what to say! But the reality is that we might best connect with loving people by just listening, by attentively listening.

Part of our challenge is that we too are human. We too need to have someone listen to us. So the temptation is huge to talk. We all like to pontificate or complain. We spout opinions. We seek to be understood.

But Steven Covey was right and just reflecting the spirit of the one another texts when he set out his maxim: Seek to understand before you seek to be understood. Understanding is best achieved as we listen. Not to prepare our argument. But we just listen seeking to understand.

The second thing friends have done for me is to ask questions. Once in a while I’ve had the strange occurrence to meet or visit with people who have no questions. I find it disturbing. It’s gives off this vibe like they already know all the answers. Of course no one does. Questions and questioning is how we learn things.

Sometimes when my thinking is stuck or I’m struggling with a decision the thoughtful question of a friend, even if it bites a little, is really valuable. Proverbs 27:6 says “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”

The great ethic of Christianity is what has come to be known as the “Golden Rule.” In Luke 6:31 we find Jesus saying these words: “Do for others as you would like them to do for you.” Here is the method to accomplish Jesus’ command that we love one another. Here is the method to fulfill Paul’s call to be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.
What is it that you would like done for you when it comes to friendship, to being loved?

We could create a whole litany of what we shouldn’t do to people, but none of that is necessary if we instead we follow this directive from Jesus to actively engage, to do for others what we would like them to do for us.”

We can only love like this because Jesus has loved us that way. We can only be that kind of friend because Jesus has befriended us. We love because he first loved us.

There are many things that distract us from loving, from giving ourselves away. Benner writes, “...The only way to truly care for myself is to give myself in love to others. There I will find my truest and deepest fulfillment.”

Jesus knew this. It was his modus operandi—He came not to be served but to serve, to love, to do for others what he would like to be done for him.

Jerry Cook took this idea of loving like Jesus and decided it would be how they would do church at his church. He wrote this about it: “Love is a commitment and operates independently of what we feel or do not feel. We need to extend this love to everyone who comes into our church.” This is the commitment he made for anyone who comes: “I want you to know that I’m committed to you. You’ll never knowingly suffer at my hands. I’ll never say or do anything, knowingly, to hurt you. I’ll always, in every circumstance, seek to help you and support you. If you’re down and I can lift you up, I’ll do that. Anything I have that you need, I’ll share with you; and if need be I’ll give it to you. No matter what I find out about you and no matter what happens in the future, either good or bad, my commitment to you will never change. And there’s nothing you can do about it. You don’t have to respond. I love you, and that’s what it means. If you come around here, we’re going to love you. No matter
who you are or what you’ve done or how you look smell, or behave, we’re going to love you.”

Isn’t that what you would want done for you? That’s what we will do for others.

Can we be friends? Yes. Not because we are just alike. Not because we belong to the same political party. Not because we attended the same school. Not because we agree but because we are the body of Christ and we will do for you what we would want done for us.

For me I know I want to be listened to and I want to be asked hard questions. And because Jesus listens to me and asks hard questions I can be a friend who listens and asks probing questions.

Once in a while it happens in my office. A person from the community or one of our members comes carrying a heavy load or facing some major decision and they are looking for some relief. And once in a while a really cool thing happens. I invite them to tell me what’s going on. And I just listen. Ask a question here and there and listen some more. And when our time together is over on these occasions, they thank me profusely for helping them, and really all I did was pay attention and inquire and they talked themselves through the situation. All I did was do for them what I’d want done for me.

Jerry Cook said, “If you come around here we’re going to love you “ but that isn’t sufficient for us. Not just people who “come” but we will be a church without walls. We will go beyond these walls and be the church that loves people into a lifelong friendship with God as we fully engage in serving the people of our community.
Part of our challenge is the quality of worship service experience to which we have grown accustomed. Right now our technical support and music teams arrive at 8:00 and complete their rehearsal that began on Thurs evening or Friday evening. At 9:00 all participants in leading and serving during our worship gather for the huddle and then we literally walk through the entire service except for the sermon. And then we are ready to start at 10. We don’t want to ask people to arrive earlier than 8 so it will be a real challenge to maintain our quality of service while removing 25 minutes of prep time from our morning, but we are willing to really work to make that happen.
Who was your “best friend” as a kid and why?

Do you feel your friendship roster is full or is there room for more friends?

When has it been easiest for you to make friends?

What relation do you see between all the “one another” texts and making and being a friend?

Who in your life do you feel really listens to you? How does that feel?

What does it mean for you to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” regarding friendship?

If you were your close friend what questions you need to be asked?

How will you practice the “Golden Rule” in relationship to your friendships or potential friendships this week?

How do you feel about love including saying no to self?

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