

Last week we began a new series called *Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus: Finding Focus in Uncertain Times*.

To say that we've been living in uncertain times lately, is to state the obvious, isn't it? In such times, scripture calls us to focus our gaze squarely on Jesus. As Hebrews chapter 12 says:

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.¹

Now, most people are familiar with what a vision statement is, or a mission statement. Cornerstone has both. But we also have something called a Bedrock Statement. What's that?

Well, bedrock is an underlying foundation that provides stability. And our "Bedrock Statement" reminds us where to turn to find the stability we need in times of crisis, confusion or stress. It reminds us where to look in order to find strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

Cornerstone's Bedrock Statement is drawn directly from the scripture passage we just read:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.

That's our Bedrock Statement. And this series is all about living into that statement, both as a church family, and in our personal lives as well. It's all about finding stability, strength, and hope in these uncertain times by fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Particularly, we'll be fixing our eyes on four portraits of Jesus found in the Gospel of John.

Last week Pastor Andrew kicked off the series by looking at Jesus the Good Shepherd in John chapter 10.

¹ Hebrews 12:1b-2 (NIV)

Today, we're going to look at Jesus as Friend. Our scripture passage for today is John chapter 15 verses 12-17, and I invite you to follow along as I read. Jesus says:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.²

"I have called you friends," says Jesus.

What is it that makes Jesus' words about friendship in this passage so relevant for us in these uncertain times?

An [article by David Kinnaman](#) of the Barna research group was published just last week, highlighting the fact that this pandemic has only served to exacerbate, to amplify, the deep relational problems people in our society had already been dealing with well before anyone had heard the term COVID-19.

For example, Kinnaman talks about how "the gnawing problem of loneliness is growing." A snapshot poll taken by his research group during the pandemic found that half of all adults said they experience loneliness at least weekly, and one third of adults say that loneliness affects their most important relationships.

And while feelings of loneliness persist across age groups, 18-22-year-olds were the loneliest cohort. Two in every three in that age group were lonely at least weekly.

Have you experienced loneliness during this pandemic? It's a little vulnerable to say so, but we can be honest with each other here. Type Y for yes if you have experienced loneliness during this pandemic, or N for no if it hasn't really been an issue for you.

Whether you've been feeling lonely or not, as we respond to the invitation to fix our eyes on Jesus, and open our ears to his words, he reveals truths about relationships and about friendship in particular that we desperately need to be reminded of.

² John 15:12-17 (NIV)

Today, we're going to unpack Jesus' teaching about friendship in John 15, and explore together why it matters so very much for us, both personally, as well as for our life and mission together as a church family—especially in light of the times we're living in.

In doing so, I'd like to share an adapted version of an outline and some other ideas from Pastor Abraham Cho that I found incredibly helpful for getting at the riches of this passage. In our text, we find Jesus revealing three aspects of true friendship:

First, he reveals:

1. The nature of true friendship.

The vision Jesus lays out in our passage is a stark departure from how our society tends to approach friendship.

Which is ironic, because you'd think that friendship-wise, we'd be doing better than we actually are. I mean we're the most connected generation history as ever known. But at the very same time, we're arguably the loneliest.

True friendship, according to Jesus, is essentially made up of two ingredients that have become more or less lost to our culture.

The first is **sacrificial faithfulness**. In verse 12 Jesus tells us:

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.³

How did Jesus love us? He laid down his life for us in sacrifice.

Greater love has no one than this: To lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.⁴

And what does Jesus command? He commands us to love each other *as he has loved us*.

So true friendship, according to Jesus, involves sacrificial faithfulness. By nature, it's costly. When you have to adjust some of your own preferences, conveniences, and desires for the sake of a friend, that's where friendship starts to get real.

³ John 15:12 (NIV)

⁴ John 15:13-14 (NIV)

The second thing that's essential to true friendship, according to Jesus, is **vulnerable openness**. In verse 15 Jesus tells his disciples:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.⁵

So Jesus lets us in on what his Father—God— is doing. His offer of friendship is this remarkable gesture of vulnerable openness to us. Astoundingly, he invites those of us who follow him into the inner sanctum of his intimate communion and communication with God the Father.

So sacrificial faithfulness held together with vulnerable openness is what true friendship is made of, says Jesus. And yet these two things are precisely what so many of us work hard to avoid in our relationships.

Shelly Turkle is an MIT professor who's been studying the effects of technology on our relationships for decades. Her ground-breaking book on this subject is entitled *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*.

On the basis of her research, her concern is that technology is actually turning us into consumers when it comes to our relationships. She writes:

We now consume other people in bits and pieces. It's as though we use them as spare parts to support our fragile selves.

And she goes on to explain that technology offers us a way to avoid the messiness that comes with being in real relationships. Because the moment some kind of interaction becomes difficult or might require some kind of sacrifice or vulnerability on our part, we always have the option of logging off, of closing that tab, of ignoring that text or post.

In your experience, do you think technology has done more to help or hinder the quality of your relationships? Type either "help" or "hinder" into the chat area. It's fine if we have different views and experiences.

But all too often, technology gives the illusion of friendship without actually requiring the sacrificial faithfulness and vulnerable openness that true friendship requires.

⁵ John 15:15 (NIV)

However, when we as Christ-followers cultivate relationships with each other that have those qualities, Jesus says that the watching world will know that we are his disciples.⁶ It's part of our mission to the world, to pursue such friendships with one another, so that the world may see what we have in Jesus, and want in.

One of the best places to grow in those qualities is in a small group. In small groups, we get to practice loving real people, sometimes even hard-to-love people. If you're not already part of a small group at Cornerstone, I highly encourage you to sign up for our upcoming Group Launch event, which will take place the evening of Wednesday, October 14.

In Group Launch, you'll be placed into a starter small group that will meet for a 6-session Bible study designed to build Jesus-centered relationships—*friendships*—within the group. At the end of the 6 sessions, the group can choose to meet longer-term it wishes, and almost all of our starter groups choose to do just that.

You can sign up for the Group Launch event using the link that's on the screen, and you'll also find it in the chat area.

Now if the nature of true friendship is sacrificial faithfulness and vulnerable openness, next Jesus reveals:

2. The context for true friendship.

Let's go back into verse 15, and then on into verse 16. Jesus says:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.⁷

These words come as part of a larger section in John's gospel in which Jesus is calling his disciples into their part of God's mission to restore the world. This is what Jesus has in mind when he says to his first disciples, and to us, "I've appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last."

⁶ See John 17:23

⁷ John 15:15-16 (NIV)

And from this, we learn that true friendships are forged when people share in a cause, a purpose, a mission that is greater than themselves. This is the context in which true friendships emerge.

In his classic book *The Four Loves* C.S. Lewis talks about how lovers often face each other and they talk to each other about the love they share. But friends, says Lewis, almost never talk about their friendships. And rather than facing each other, friends stand side by side facing the same horizon on the same journey, seeking the same truth, the same mission, the same purpose.

You see, friendship emerges not for its own sake, but for the sake of something greater.

So many of the movies we love tell the story of two or more people who at first don't know each other all that well, if at all. Maybe they're even kind of mismatched or don't like each other all that much. But because of a shared mission or goal they go on a journey together, and these unlikely companions go through all kinds of adventures and by the end they've forged a bond of friendship that's far deeper than they would have ever imagined.

Perhaps the reason we don't tire of hearing such stories is because God has made us for such friendships—friendships rooted and forged in a purpose infinitely greater than self.

But in our culture today relationships tend to be all about self—about *my* notion of truth, *my* idea of purpose and meaning, about *my* wishes, desires, and preferences. Therefore, in order to prop up my sense of self identity, what do I have to do? I have to surround myself with people who are just like *me*— people who always affirm and support me and my agenda no matter what, people who will never call my ways into question.

And when that happens, I end up using those people as spare parts to support my fragile sense of self.

But what Jesus shows us is that when there is a shared purpose and mission greater than self, it becomes the context in which sacrificially faithful and vulnerably open friendships can grow—even between people who might be very different from each other.

It's the context where friendships that can grow even across radical differences—race, culture, class, and generational differences.

Jesus' twelve disciples came from a mix of backgrounds, classes, political affiliations, and religious leanings. Under normal circumstances, they would have never chosen to hang out with each other.

And beyond the original twelve disciples, the people who formed the early Christian church came from an even broader and more radical range of differences. But they were brought together in love by a shared Lord who gave them a shared mission – God’s mission to restore this broken world in and through Jesus.

That’s what made the early church so utterly remarkable in the society they lived in. They were a community made out of natural enemies that in Jesus became closer than family. And the world took notice.

Cornerstone’s story as an intercultural church is similar. Originally planted out of a Chinese church context, Cornerstone now has people from well over 40 different countries of origin—people of all races, cultures, ages, abilities, and backgrounds—the kind of people who don’t normally band together. But in Jesus, we have become one family. Indeed, we have become friends bound together in love by a shared Lord, and the shared mission God has given us for the sake of the greater community and the world.

Such unity-in-diversity stands out like a beacon in an increasingly selfish, lonely, and divided society. It makes the world take notice. It’s a demonstration of the reconciling power of the gospel at work, and it draws people to Jesus.

So far we’ve seen how Jesus reveals the nature of true friendship and the context of true friendship. Lastly—and this is the very heart of things— Jesus reveals:

3. The One True Friend.

Let’s go back to verse 15, where Jesus says:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.⁸

These words must have shocked those first disciples. Because as Jews they knew full well that God was King, God, Master, Creator and Lord. But God was not supposed to be your friend.

And the setting of the New Testament is the ancient Greco-Roman world, they defined friendship as the love shared between persons of equal status.

⁸ John 15:15 (NIV)

So in that culture a master could never be the friend of a servant. A man and a woman could never be friends. Rich and poor could never be friends. Because none of them were considered equals.

But Jesus—the human embodiment of the God who has no equal— says I have called you friends. You're my friends when you turn from your sins and follow me. Prostitutes, fishermen, tax collectors, political zealots, women, men, Jews, Gentiles, slave, free, wealthy, poor, red, yellow, brown, black and white, conservatives, liberals—everyone.

So in the ancient world, friendship was a love shared between equals. But in Jesus, friendship is a love that *makes* people equals.

And so above all in this text, Jesus— the One True Friend who can truly transform you— is offering you his friendship. The One True Friend who was sacrificially faithful to you, even at the cost of his own life is offering you his friendship.

The One True Friend who was vulnerably open to you, even when that vulnerability meant that he would lose his life, is offering you his friendship today.

Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for a friend. Jesus, the One True Friend, has laid down his life to make you a friend of his.

Do you know his love? Have you experienced the transforming friendship of Jesus? This past year, as I journeyed in prayer with the support of my spiritual director, Jesus revealed himself to me as Friend in a fresh and intimate way, and it was a deeply healing and settling revelation.

In sacrificial faithfulness and vulnerable openness, Jesus offers you his friendship today. Wherever you may be in your journey with Jesus, if you want to embrace his offer of personal friendship with you in a fresh way today, I invite you to tangibly affirm that by simply typing Yes into the chat area at this time.

As well, remember that if you need prayer, just click the Prayer button on your screen, and someone will be glad to pray with you.

As we go forward into the week ahead, let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the One True Friend. Amen.