

A photograph of two elderly women smiling warmly. The woman on the left has short, curly grey hair and is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. The woman on the right has short, straight grey hair and is wearing a light yellow t-shirt. They are standing in what appears to be a church interior, with a red carpeted aisle and wooden pews visible in the background. The text 'THE PLYMOUTH PULPIT' is overlaid on the image in a white serif font. The word 'PLYMOUTH' is on the top line, 'PULPIT' is on the bottom line, and 'THE' is centered above 'PLYMOUTH'. A small, colorful logo consisting of four vertical bars (green, red, blue, yellow) is positioned between 'PLYMOUTH' and 'H'.

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“Real Friends”

Philippians 1:3-11

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

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I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Mark 1:29-39

In his memoir, *The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man*, Paul Newman writes—and if you are my age, this is hard to believe— “I wonder what my old age is going to be like, because I really don't have many friends. It's hard to feel lonely in New York, but I do sometimes. When Joanne is out of town, or I've been by myself longer than I've been accustomed to, I realize there aren't a lot of people I can count on, and the ones I can count on are few and far between. If I wanted company, I wouldn't know who to call. Most of the people I know well aren't around, so I just walk around the house and bump into things.” (277)

Can you believe that? Butch Cassidy, Henry Gondorff, and “Fast Eddie” Felson said he does not have friends. Everybody loves “Cool Hand Luke.” How can he say he has

no friends?

I realize I need to explain this to some of you who are 30 years younger than I am. Paul Newman is the face on the salad dressing, spaghetti sauce, and popcorn. Paul Newman was Paul Rudd, Paul Bettany, and Paul Walker, all rolled into one and better. Paul Newman was St. Paul for some. If Paul Newman did not have real friends, what chance do we have?

Our friendships are not as good as the ones in the movies: Thelma and Louise, Timon and Pumbaa, Harold and Kumar, Marlin and Dory, and Goose and Maverick. Our friendships are not as good as the ones on TV: Grace and Frankie, Joey and Chandler, Rory and Lane, James and the other Derry Girls, and The Flash and Green Arrow. (I haven't actually seen *The Arrowverse*, but I am guessing they are good friends.)

We feel like our friendships should be bigger and more fun, because we have been lied to. Social media lies to us. One of the big lies is that everyone else is at a party that never stops. Our everyday lives do not compare to the friends who are always on a beach, looking skinny, drinking margaritas at a surprise Taylor Swift concert.

We do not see that most people do not feel like they have good friends. When we were children, making friends was as simple as playing on the swings together, but, as adults, making friends is hard. According to one study, the average American adult has not made a new friend in five years. Five years. (John Delony, "10 Tips for How to Make Friends," August 24, 2023)

We are not sure who to trust. We have been burned before. BFFs do not last forever. We have not worn our

matching Halloween costumes in years.

Lots of us are introverts. We are not good at starting conversations. How many times can you ask, “How ‘bout this weather?” “How ‘bout that mayor?” “How ‘bout that sermon?”

We do not have the friends we want because the friends we want do not want to be our friends or we will never find them or we do not fit in with anyone anyway.

And we are too busy to have friends. When we have demanding work schedules, involved family lives, or a combination of the two, the time left for investing in friendship is small. We find it hard to carve out time for potential friendships. We say, “We have to get together,” and almost never do. Researchers estimate it takes 50 hours of shared contact to move from acquaintances to casual friends. To be a close friend? More than 200 hours. (*The Conversation*, “Why do we find making new friends so hard as adults?” January 20, 2022)

Having an old friend takes a long time. Peter Pan made some good points, and yet most have broken the cardinal rule of Neverland—we have grown up and stopped having fun. Covid made lying on the couch the default position. The meme pictures a woman wrapped up in a blanket with the caption, “Making new friends is hard, because the people I would like don’t want to leave the couch either.”

Bingeing *Better Call Saul* is easy, but not having friends is bad for us. Chronic loneliness is lethal. Some doctors say it is the equivalent of 15 cigarettes a day. Not having friends is terrible for our health and our faith.

St. Paul is near the end of his life. He looks back, and

is grateful for his friends. Paul is in a Roman prison on death row spending his last days thanking God. His head will be on the chopping block any day, so he writes a final letter to his friends at Philippi.

Paul loves this church—Lydia, the seller of purple, and the jailer who locked up Paul and Silas and then joined them for a midnight hymn sing. This church has kept up with Paul for years. Philippi is the only church that sends him money. They are his best friends.

Paul does not have photographs, but he has letters that he has read dozens of times. Although he keeps writing thank you, he is really saying goodbye. Imagine how much Paul would love to see his friends one more time. Paul is in a dark place, but he can remember the light.

As famous dying words go, Paul's are gorgeous. These are right up there with Wallace Hartley, the violinist in *Titanic*: "Gentlemen, it has been a privilege playing with you tonight." Boromir in *Lord of the Rings*: "I would have followed you, my brother... my captain... my king." *Mr. Spock in Star Trek 2*: "I have been and always shall be your friend. Live long and prosper."

Now with tears in his eyes, Paul writes last words to the people he loves: "Every time you cross my mind, I give thanks to God. I pray for you with a smile on my face. I'm glad that we've shared our lives. I'm grateful for every minute I got to spend with you. There's never been the slightest doubt that you and I would keep sharing God's love."

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* are hard to get

through without tears. The reader's attention is divided between the words on the page and the pain the author's going through. Reading is a different experience when you know the writer could be executed soon.

When Paul's letter is read to the congregation, several tear up at "I hold you in my heart." Others cry at "You are my partners in God's grace from the first day until now." Paul is on death row and they are at church. It does not sound like an equal partnership.

Paul continues: "It's not far-fetched for me to think this way about you. My prayers and hopes have deep roots. You've stuck with me even as I've gone to prison. God knows how much I love and miss you these final days." No one is holding it together when they hear, "How I long for all of you."

They weep as they thank God for Paul. They weep because Paul is worried about them. Paul's a good minister. He helps the church recognize what matters. He tells them how much friendships matter.

We do not have any reason to think Phil Collins was reading Philippians when he wrote *You'll Be in My Heart* except it sounds like Phil Collins was reading Philippians when he wrote: "Come stop your crying. It will be alright. ... This bond between us can't be broken... Don't you cry, 'cause you'll be in my heart. From this day on, now and forever more. You'll be in my heart always."

If we want full lives, we need friends to make our days bigger and better. Friendship multiplies the good and divides the bad.

Oprah Winfrey writes: "Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who'll

take the bus with you when the limo breaks down.”

Oprah needs to know that many of us have not had the experience of our limo breaking down, but we do need to be there for one another. We are more connected than we realize.

During a Lenten art group at Plymouth, Molly Anna passed out paint, pencils, paper, glue, brushes, buttons, sequins, and glitter—lots of glitter: “We’ll be working on these projects for twenty minutes.”

After ten minutes of painting, gluing, and bedazzling, the instructor said: “We’re halfway done. Pass your work to the person on your left.”

The students were confused: “Huh? What?”

She explained: “Art is a group project. We’re in this together.”

Some were embarrassed to pass along their work, because they did not think it was good enough. Others were afraid of messing up what was handed to them. We need to recognize those who are already part of our lives.

We may think we are on our own, but life is a group project. The people around us make our lives possible. They pick up what we set down. We pick up what they set down. Life is collaborative. People are solving problems we never have, but would have if they were not solving them. We think we are doing individual projects, but our workplaces, schools, and church are alliances, associations, collusions, concerts, and combinations. We work with what others create and create what others work with.

Each person is a new world we will not know without being their friends. We are often reticent to open ourselves to friendship, as though we do not think people want

friends. But you are the friend someone needs right now. Some of our best friends are ahead of us. If we live with openness and unselfishness, thinking of others, they will want to share their lives with us.

So, here is what we should do. Have more fun. See strangers as potential friends. If we want to be around people, we can invite people to be around us. Take the time to develop new friendships. Make the most of the time we have. Avoid distractions and be present with one another.

Find small ways to be a friend. Send a text, give a gift, or have a three-minute conversation rather than just a hello. Look at the people at work and ask who might need a friend like you.

Listen to what others are saying. Figure out what they are really saying. Join a group that shares your interests—running or gardening or writing.

Go to church. Invite someone to church. Tell your partner you are both going to the couples retreat at Plymouth this weekend. Bring your dog to the Blessing of the Animals. Go with people from Plymouth to the Museum of the American Indian or to work with Rauschenbusch Ministries.

Friendship is slow and steady and unpredictable. That is good news for those of us who wonder if we have good friends. God is at work in the world, in the church, and in our lives.

God calls us to joyful friendship, to the *Friends* theme song level of friendship, “I’ll be there for you, when the rain starts to pour, ‘cause you’re there for me too.” Rihanna’s *Umbrella* kind of friendship, “When the sun shines, we’ll shine together” *Golden Girls*, “Your heart is true.

You're a pal and a confidant" Dorothy-Blanche-Rose-Sophia kind of friendship.

Frederick Buechner writes, "Friends are people you make part of your life just because you feel like it. There are lots of other ways people get to be part of each other's lives, like being related to each other, living near each other, sharing some special passion with each other like jogging or lepidopterology, but though all or any of those may be involved in a friendship, they are secondary to it. Basically, your friends are not your friends for any particular reason. They are your friends for no particular reason. The job you do, the family you have, the way you vote, the major achievements and blunders of your life, your religious convictions or lack of them are all somehow set off to one side when the two of you get together. If you are old friends, you know all those things about each other and a lot more besides, but they are beside the point. Even if you talk about them, they are beside the point. Stripped, humanly speaking, to the bare essentials, you are yourselves the point. The usual distinctions of older-younger, richer-poorer, smarter-dumber, male-female even, cease to matter. You meet with a clean slate every time, and you meet on equal terms. Anything may come of it or nothing may. That does not matter either. Only the meeting matters."

There are moments for all of us when hope almost goes out, but some friend who is holding us in their hearts keeps hope flickering. We should be thankful for those who rekindle our hope. We should be those friends for others.

Friendship is the purpose of the Christian life from beginning to end. God creates us out of love to love. God helps us hold one another in our hearts.