

# Friendship

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Angela Herrera

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First Unitarian Church

September 20, 2020

So... our last Bring a Friend Sunday was the Sunday before the pandemic shut everything down. March 8<sup>th</sup>. There had definitely already been “something going around.” We had stopped shaking hands in church and had set out a hand sanitizer station. But we didn’t know anything about airborne transmission. Or stay at home orders. Or Social Distancing. Oh my gosh. We just didn’t know. This year has been unlike any other, and it was hard to imagine how things were about to change. Can you imagine? Bring a Friend Sunday on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020?

On the other hand, friendship could not be more important right now. So, maybe it is just right that the last time we were together in person, it was also the day to bring a friend.

Having friends is very helpful when we are going through something difficult. That might sound obvious, but there’s a vivid example from a scientific study done in 2008. In the study, the researchers positioned themselves at the bottom of a steep hill, and invited passersby to volunteer to participate.

The passersby were asked to put on a backpack that weighed about 20% of their body weight. Pretty hefty. And then they were asked to guess how steep the hill in front of them was. The hill had a 26 degree grade. For comparison, that’s more than twice as steep as the average grade of the La Luz trail here in Albuquerque, which is known for being steep.

You can imagine that having been asked if they’d participate in the study, and then asked to put on the backpack, and then asked to estimate the steepness of the hill, they probably expected they were going to be asked to climb it next. But they weren’t. The researchers just wanted to see how accurately the participants would guess the hill’s steepness, especially in light of the unspoken idea that they *might* have to climb it.

One of the ways people were asked to show the steepness was by putting their dominant hand on a palm board and adjusting it to match the slant of the hill. Some of the people who participated were alone. Others had happened to walk by with a friend, in which case each friend participated. And the results? People who were there alone estimated that the hill was steeper than people who were there with a friend. People with a friend thought the hill didn’t look *that* steep. The presence of a friend changed how participants perceived it. And **the longer the friends** had known each other, the less steep the hill seemed.<sup>i</sup>

We have had some hills to climb in 2020, haven't we? And we've still got miles to go.

Other studies have shown that friendships help us live longer, healthier lives. There have been lots of news stories saying that being married is good for health and longevity. But in fact, friendship has an even bigger impact on our health outcomes than marital status does.<sup>ii</sup>

All of that is true. And.... meanwhile, many people in the United States report that they are short on friends and friendly support. There has been a lot of reporting over the last decade on "the loneliness epidemic" in America. In January this year, the health insurer Cigna published a report sharing that 61% of American adults say they are lonely.<sup>iii</sup> That was before the pandemic led to social distancing.

We often think of loneliness as being especially common among older adults. But actually, the opposite may be true. Time magazine published an article with some of *those* statistics back in April.<sup>iv</sup> These numbers come from people reporting how they felt in 2019. So, also pre-pandemic. For 2019, thirty-eight percent of people in the so called "silent generation" (people over 72) reported feeling lonely. (I say "so called" because whenever I attend a social justice march or protest, that generation *always* turns out; they are anything but silent.) Thirty-eight percent of people in that age group reported feeling lonely. That's pretty high. But then, *fifty* percent of boomers said they were lonely. That's people age 52-71. Fifty percent: that's even higher. And the numbers keep going up as you go down the age scale. By the time you get to adults in Gen Z, ages 18-22, seventy-nine percent said they were lonely.

It was highest among the youngest adults, but it was widespread in every age group. So, here's something I hope you'll take away from this service today: If you often feel lonely, or if you have found it hard to make friends, it does not mean you have done something wrong or that something is wrong with you. A lot of other people also feel that way.

Another thing that happens is that people report feeling lonely even when they are with other people. Why do we sometimes, or perhaps often, feel lonely in a crowd? We may feel lonelier in a crowd than when we are alone because we may have had an expectation or hope, maybe unconsciously, that we'd feel connected with others. But being together is not the same as being connected. And then, in that crowd, we may see others who are connected, or seem to be, and comparing our sense of disconnection to that can amplify our feelings of loneliness. But if you experience that feeling, now you know, statistically, that a pretty big percentage of the people there is probably feeling just as lonely as you.

All of this talk about the value of friendship, and how lonely everyone seems to feel makes me wonder what everybody actually means by "friends." What is a friend?

The word friend is kind of like the word “love.” It is used for many, many things that are so distinct they should probably each have their own word. The kids you played hide and go seek with when you were little: friends. A person you used to be in a romantic relationship with but with whom you are now are now merely amicable: friend. We receive letters from non-profit organizations that start with “dear friend.” People in a book club: friends. Two people who have known each other for fifty years, who attended the births of each other’s children, and carried each other through seasons of grief, and who have laughed and cried and shared the most intimate truths of their lives with each other: friends. Someone you never call and only see every few years but when you do you pick right back up where you left off and it is delightful: friend. Someone you’ve met once who networks with you on a social media platform: *friend?*

The lack of words for different kinds of friendship becomes even more problematic when the concept of friendship is idealized and romanticized in ways that do not apply to all friends. It can leave us wondering if we have any “real friends.” Check out this quote from an article about friendship in Parabola magazine in the early 2000’s:

We have talked so much that there is nothing we do not know about each other. Yet there is always something to say. It is always being said, and afterward neither of us can remember who said it. When we speak, even when it is the intimate expression of a deep, personal experience, we are a single voice. Nothing is between us. We are simply present... We always meet as if for the first time, without dependence of past, strangers even, but with an uncanny essential kinship. It is as if we have died and death, the abyss that separated us, across which we struggled to communicate, has disappeared.<sup>v</sup>

Those are some high standards. I don’t think many human relationships can quite live up to that!

When couples come to me for pre-marital counseling, there’s a little relationship inventory I have them do. One set of questions in it has to do with whether they are overly idealizing marriage. Do they think they will always be as head over heels in love with their partner as they are right now? Do they believe nothing could ever cause them to question their love for one another? Do they say that nothing could ever drive them apart? Yes? Hold up, grasshoppers. That’s not what marriage between living human beings is like! If you hold it to an impossible standard, then you’re not going to like being married very much.

Likewise, if we hold friendship to an impossible standard, that belief may cause us to feel unhappy, or to worry that something is wrong with us or with our friends. If we believe friendship must entail a certain kind of perfect intimacy or it doesn’t count, we may perceive ourselves as friendless, when in reality there are many kinds of friends. Nourishing friendships come in many forms. One does not have to be the be-all, end-all.

The writer Mia Mingus shared some powerful words this week about friendship, which does not idealize a particular form of friendship, but still acknowledges that we are lacking the language—and the art—to convey friendship’s power and diversity.

Mingus is a writer as well as a community educator for transformative justice and disability justice. She wrote:

Wish we embraced falling in friendship love and the magic of friendship love in general. It really is such a magnificent, kindred soul-shifting experience that can manifest in so many wonderfully different ways. It truly deserves its own genre of art, movies/TV, writing, music.

Wish we had more vocabulary to talk about our friendships. Wish we didn’t relegate friendship to the binary of either lover/partner or friend. Ugh. It’s so limiting and does not do justice to the complexity of friendships and love we feel for and with our friends.

My friends have saved my life. They have been there for me in some of my most darkest and joyful times. They have romanced me and i them. They are not “layovers” between partners/lovers. They are not “side dishes” to the “main dish.”

They occupy such an important part of what love is and can be. They don’t diminish other forms of love. They enhance them. They are a unique kind of home, especially for me as a queer, disabled, adoptee, woman of color, survivor.<sup>vi</sup>

And then, because not every friendship is an eternal kinship across the abyss of death, Mingus goes on to also talk about friendship break ups. She names the pain those can cause us and the lack of language or art to express it. I know exactly what she means. The biggest break ups of my life have been friendship break ups, where we went from being intimate friends to “just friends” and I—who put things into words for a living—could not find the language to describe that loss.

What we cannot find language for, we will struggle understand. So it is, too, I think, that we can have many different kinds of friends and potential friends around us, and still experience a uncomfortable sense of disconnection and loneliness. This is a deeply spiritual matter. The pain of loneliness is an existential pain. It is linked with our sense of meaning, resilience, and self-worth.

So how can we develop more nourishing connections with the friends we have, and even make some new ones? That's what I want to spend the rest of our time reflecting on.

Well, first of all, we must accept that we ourselves are friend material. Remember what I said about if you've been lonely or if you've struggled to make friends, that it doesn't mean something is wrong with you? Remember *that*. The reading we heard today, *Self-Compassion* by James Crews, describes so sweetly how we can befriend not just other people, but also ourselves. "Oh, honey," he says to himself, as he frets over his husband's health and a leaky pipe and the fact of his own mortality. "Oh honey." And who wouldn't want to be friends with him after reading that poem?

Give yourself a break, hon. And then, I think our search for friendship itself may be a bit like trying to pin down the soul. I'll tell you what I mean. I'm thinking of soul the way the poet Wislawa Szymborska talks about souls in one of her poems. "We all have a soul at times," she writes.

Joy and sorrow  
aren't two different feelings for it.  
It attends us  
only when the two are joined.

We can count on it  
when we're sure of nothing  
and curious about everything.

She makes the soul sound shy. When joy and sorrow are joined in us, as she puts it, that's a place of depth and realness, isn't it? Friendship also deepens where we are present to life's realness. It grows when we share authentically of ourselves, about our joys and sorrows, and other things that matter to us.

And her words, we can count on it when we are sure of nothing and curious about everything, remind me of how rare it is that we make an instant friend. More often, we don't know who will move from acquaintance to friend or how long that will take. We are uncertain. It takes a long time to make an old friend. But one thing that helps foster friendship is our genuine curiosity. Curiosity about others. Not in the sense of interrogating them, but of being interested in them, open to who they might be and what they might share, and with a sense of wonder rather than judgment.

The Greater Good Science Center at Berkeley made the news when they shared a set of thirty-six questions that studies have shown will bring two people closer together. The headlines said things like "how to fall in love with anyone." But it isn't just for romantic couples. Taking turns

answering the questions is an engaging way to connect with new or old friends, too. I'll put a link to the questions in the chat box after this sermon. And you can always find links in the text version of my sermons, which go onto the church website within a few days after the service.

[Link: [https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/36\\_questions\\_for\\_increasing\\_closeness](https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/36_questions_for_increasing_closeness)]

Another writer, Alvin Moore Jr, talks about the soul in this way: he says, "the soul is not known by the soul—such a feat would be like hearing hearing itself, or sight seeing itself." This suggests that soul is more properly understood as a verb. That for a soul to know itself would be soul souling itself.

"Friend" should probably also be understood as a verb. Instead of focusing on acquiring friends and trying to define who is and isn't one, we could then just focus on *friending*. This allows the connection you have with a particular person to be what it is, without the seemingly black and white categories of friend and not-friend, or real friend and "friend."

Of course, we have to stay flexible and creative in order to practice our friending during the pandemic.

When socially distanced visits in pairs or very small groups aren't possible, technology allows us to stay in touch, but we are missing some of the things that usually make our interactions with friends nourishing. One researcher refers to most zoom chats and phone calls as "social snacking."<sup>vii</sup> Because they lack some of the aspects of interpersonal connection that are most nourishing, they leave us still hungry. Or, in other words, kind of lonely.

So what are the things that are missing?

In many cases, we are missing shared experiences. This is a loss for people of all genders, but studies suggest it may be especially hard on the connection between men who are friends. Friendships between men tend to depend more on shared activities than women's friendships do. These gender categories are kind of clunky, but perhaps this information is useful. If you know this extended time of social distancing may diminish your connection with friends, what can you do to renew those connections?

It is possible to create shared experiences remotely.

What are some of the other creative ways you've thought of to share an experience? Feel free to list them in the chat box. What about chopping and packaging your roasted green chile (if

you live in New Mexico) or carving Halloween pumpkins together on a video call? Or, the other day, my husband and I ate dinner with a couple of friends over video. We got take out from the same restaurant. As we shared a meal prepared by the same cooks, we enjoyed the kind of informal banter that organically happens when you are just hanging out.

And how about making new friends? In this time, we are experiencing far fewer interactions with what sociologists refer to as “weak ties.” I wish they would call them “loose connections” instead because that sounds more positive. “Weak ties” are people you are friendly with, but whom you may not consider a friend. At least not yet. Some weak ties eventually become our friends.

We can still practice friending with our “weak ties.” You can make the most of the ones you do see by making an intentional effort to briefly connect when you see them. You can also create virtual spaces to hang out with people you may not know well—some of our congregation’s zipcode groups have hosted happy hours on zoom that fit this bill. Or, join an ongoing small group at church for a chance to have regular interactions and get to know others.

I hope one thing we will learn from the COVID era is that we do not have to be together to be connected. Social distancing is a misnomer. In COVID what we need is physical distancing, not social distancing. Here’s an interesting fact: after an initial increase in loneliness after the pandemic began, later studies showed that loneliness leveled off again.<sup>viii</sup> The pandemic has normalized conversations about loneliness. It has made it easier to say, “I’m lonely,” and this opens a door for people, so many of whom are also lonely, to connect.

I’ve got one more thing to say, and this is important: if you are lonely and you’re feeling stuck and you just aren’t sure what to do about it, the church can help with that, too. A good place to start is the care team. You can reach them by emailing [caring@uuabq.org](mailto:caring@uuabq.org). There’s also a link on our church website. You just click “connect” at the top of the homepage, and then caring network.

There are still some hills for us to tackle. But no one has to do it alone.

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<sup>i</sup> Schnall, Simone et al. “Social Support and the Perception of Geographical Slant.” *Journal of experimental social psychology* vol. 44,5 (2008): 1246-1255. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2008.04.011

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/guides/smarterliving/how-to-be-a-better-friend?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fsmarter-living&action=click&contentCollection=smarter-living&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=3&pgtype=sectionfront&redirect=true](https://www.nytimes.com/guides/smarterliving/how-to-be-a-better-friend?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fsmarter-living&action=click&contentCollection=smarter-living&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=3&pgtype=sectionfront&redirect=true)

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<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combating-loneliness/cigna-2020-loneliness-infographic.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://time.com/5833681/loneliness-covid-19/>

<sup>v</sup> Bamford, Christopher. "The Joy of Two: Notes on Friendship in the Gospels." *Parabola*. Winter 2004. (6)

<sup>vi</sup> For the specific post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFJCOsAAVue/> For Mingus's Instagram page:

<https://www.instagram.com/mia.mingus/> .

<sup>vii</sup> Robson, David. "Missed Connections." *New Scientist*, 02624079, 8/15/2020, Vol. 247, Issue 3295

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/in-the-midst-of-the-pandemic-loneliness-has-leveled-out/>