

If you remember, last week we talked about God's call to Abraham and his descendants be repurposed as a blessing to others. IF you don't remember the sermon, at least maybe you remember that I handed out \$50 bills to five volunteers who stepped forward to promise to do something before they knew what it was.

I already have a report back from one of our missionaries who used his blessing to bless others.

And if you remember, the week before the sermon was about Isaiah's call to *remember* AND to *remember not* the things of old. How God invites us to remember and to forget on purpose.

Perhaps you've heard the expression: they've got a mind like a sieve. It means that the person is very forgetful. And you've probably heard the opposite expression they've got a mind like a steel trap.

Last week, Isaiah was mixing his metaphors: Believers have a mind like a steel sieve. We let go of our old habits as God does a new thing to accomplish what God set out to do from the very beginning.

And what was it God set out to do from the beginning? That's what we focused on the first Sunday of Lent: 2 Corinthians 5:14-19 and how God reconciled the world unto himself through Jesus. And how we are called to that ministry of reconciliation.

We noticed how the call of discipleship is the call into a faith-community through which God reconciles people into repurposed relationships with each other and with God.

So over the past three weeks, through these three passages we have been focusing our season of Lent on Jesus as he sets his face toward Jerusalem. All three of these passages are from our Vital Ministry Journey Bible study. Because the call to be ministers of reconciliation, to remember while forgetting, and becoming a people repurposed as God's blessing to others are essential parts of what it means to live in God's kingdom of love.

And this Sunday's scripture from John 15 is also part of the Vital Ministry Bible Study. Because it introduces an entirely unthinkable idea of friendship.

BTS inauguration introduced: "And yes. And this is my friend, Chris."

Think to yourself: what does it mean to be a friend? I'm not talking about Facebook friends, or fair-weather friends, or friendships that are of convenience or some of those "what's-in-it-for-me" friends or the salesperson friendships like the guy who stopped by to pray with me for our church copy machine.

What is a friend to you? What is real friendship?

[Have congregation break into small groups and share about this **Introverts**, if this is an especially painful experience to you, you can have your conversation with a piece of paper (there's space in your bulletin) ...]

Get input: What is a friend to you? What is real friendship?

Chapter 15 of the Gospel of John is part of Jesus' lengthy conversation with his disciples as he turns his face toward Jerusalem and gets ready to die ... for them ... and us.

Here he tells them that his followers are not his servants, or his robots, or his saints ... but his friends.

Proverbs 17:17 "A friend loves at all times, and Brethren are born to share adversity."

Proverbs 18:24 "Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin."

Proverbs 27:6 "Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy."

The greatest love is this, says Jesus, that a person lay down their life for their friends.

[PTSD is not just re: killing or chaos or living a life in constant fear of being attacked. Combat veterans have told us, one of the things that impacted them the most deeply, is having a buddy who laid down his life for his friends. On the battle field, I have been told by veterans, soldiers think less of flag and country than of friends.

[And even those of us who abhor war and believe it contrary to the will of God and the command of Jesus, can still pause with respect and prayer at the grave of those who, with bravery and self-sacrifice, laid down their lives for their friends ... and we can pray, as we were asked last week, for those damaged by these wars and who end up taking their own lives because of what they've seen, and done, and even now experience in their lives laid down for their friends.]

And if human friendship can be this powerful and life-changing, how much more so do our lives and purpose and perspective change when we are befriended by God?

And what does it mean to be befriended by God?

Years ago our Church of the Brethren Annual Conference theme was "Living as God's friends." And when our moderator asked the five preachers to preach on the topic they couldn't find five scriptures that used those words in the whole Bible.

In fact, in the Bible only one person is called the "friend of God."

Lots of different folks are called believers, some are called God's prophets, but only one, in all of scripture, is called God's friends. That was Abraham ... the guy we talked about last week.... the guy who was called to be a blessing to others.

Through the words of the prophet Isaiah God calls Abraham, "my friend." (Is 41:8)

And in the New Testament the book of James repeats this saying, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God." (Jm 2:23)

And here is this passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus turns to his followers and says, “No one has greater love than this, but to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. [And YOU are my friends.]”

Now, I’m going to drone one and one here a little bit so that you can let your imagination take you where it needs to go ... and I hope it takes you to a place where this “befriending” can really sink in.

God. The source of Life and new-life. The Divine source of salvation and redemption ... God loves you ... not as a pet, not like a new car, not as a tool, not just because of what you can do for God ... not as a salesperson ... but as a friend.

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This journey of faith is a fascinating thing. It takes these gargantuan journeys with such tiny steps.

It’s not always in this order, but often we begin with that simple, universal, internal feeling that there is a God. That something greater than us is out there or in here somewhere. As the old old insight that humans are created with a God-shaped hole in our hearts; and we try to fill it with all kinds of things, yet only one thing really fits that inner long ... the god-shaped God.

So we begin to pick at the threads of life a bit and realize they are attached to something bigger at the other end.

As we learn to pray and wait and listen and share in a kind of conversation with this Divine mystery in a personal way we begin to draw closer. Even if we don’t know exactly how to reach out to God or to talk with God or to connect with God, the simple desire to connect with God connects with God.

As Jeremiah promises: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Tiny step after tiny step we grow in this awareness. God's presence in life and the world around us bleeds through everything we see and we can get so overwhelmed by the absolute mystery and eternal other-ness of God. I mean, how in the world can we use language to describe the infinite mystery of God? The earliest people of faith tried. They told of a creator before creation ... a timeless One before time and after time... who spoke a word and the chaos and void of whatever was here before everything was formed into something.

But even those descriptions were not enough. So we remembered stories of what God is like and how God impacts creation --- an entire Old Testament of how God interacted with creation through people and law and time.

And even that whole library of stories was not enough. How do you get a grasp of the ungraspable? How does one describe the one beyond description?

As soon as we begin trying to describe God, we are overwhelmed with the insufficiency of our words. We say, "God is love" (First John 4:8). Or we say "God is light" (First John 1:5). Or we say "God is God" or "God is King" or use a whole slew of descriptors like God is good, God is like a shield, God is your protection by day and night. But in each and every case that's not enough --- what kind of shield, what kind of lights, what kind of love?

The vastness of the idea of God leads to interesting problems. The Hebrew word first used for God was Elohim. And the word is plural. But it's not plural as in there is more than one of them. It's plural because God was understood to be too big to just be singular.

As soon as we say God is ANYTHING, we have to start hitting the backspace key until the best we can do is say: God is. But even then, without a beginning or ending we have to define what is, is. And we must hit the backspace key again until finally, and simply, we simply say God.

Saint Augustine said, "To fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek him the greatest adventure; to find him, the greatest human achievement."

When God called Moses to pester Pharaoh enough to set the Israelites free, Moses asked God, "This is going to be really difficult and Pharaoh will never listen to me, so who should I tell him sent me?" And God answered Moses by giving him God's name ... but nobody knows how to pronounce it or what it means.

God said, tell him YHWH sent you.

But the Israelites were so cautious to never say the name of God in public in case people began abusing the holy name of God that whenever they came to this YHWH in the text they would simply say "The Lord" and never pronounce the YHWH.

So a thousand years later when the scribes finally got around to adding vowels to the text (yes, that's right, the Old Testament was first written without any vowels) they got to the letters YHWH and nobody knew what vowels to use since nobody had ever heard it pronounced.

The first German translator pronounced their Y's as J's and their W's as V's so they pronounced it Jehovah. Nowadays we pronounce it Yahweh. And it really doesn't matter because the translation of God's name is just as mysterious. When you try to translate the letters YHWH it means "I Am what I am" or "I am what I will be" ... we're not even sure about that. So God telling Moses, just tell your captors that "I am" sent me."

The mystery of God has ALWAYS outpaced our ability to capture him with words.

So when our spiritual journey matures to the place where we come to recognize the vastness of what God means and who God is, our overwhelmed minds start asking "how will I ever know who God is?"

And in our spiritual journey we begin to learn about Jesus. God incarnate. God in flesh. God among us. Creator as creation.

We learn from Jesus what God is like... what love is like....That love lays down its own life for others. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It never ends.

And through Jesus we learn that God loves us, as a friend.

How does Jesus say it here?

I no longer call you servants (slaves: doulas)"servant" is used over 800 time in the Bible. And many of those are in connection with being servants of God. Or deacons in the church. Or servant one unto another.

But part of what happens, as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem ... toward his throne that is the cross ... is that he turns to those who follow him as master and lord and says I no longer call you servants but friends.

He befriends those who are with him.

And through Jesus ... as God incarnate ... we understand this with the sense that God is befriending us. We, in Christ, are blessed and befriended.

And in the next step of faith, sensing and responding to the most basic understanding of the existence of God and then learning of the clearest and most accessible example and presence of God among humankind ... who has died so that his friends might live, we step forward to be engulfed in that gift.

That is what baptism is: It a symbolic representation of stepping into that engulfing gift of God. As the waters wash over us they symbolize cleansing. As we are covered by these same waters we symbolize our death in the example of Jesus... or more exactly, our death of our old life ... so that when we rise up, out of the water, we symbolize the new life we share with him.

A life beyond the grave and beyond the slavery that will not let us go easily right now. ... not until it meets the "I am" that will be.

It changes in the face of everyday life! And it changes our imagined entry into life ever after --- with that metaphorical image of standing before God's throne of judgment and Jesus, beside him, saying. "Oh yes. And this is my friend."