

**Two by Two**  
First UMC of Pocatello  
November 14, 2021

Mark 6:1-13

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“I will be to him now what he was to me that day when we stood by the road-side, waiting for the *diligence* to Paris, and my purpose broke, and, —he saved me.

—Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

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During the summer of 2020, just after a four-year pastoral appointment came to an exhausting end, I went to the North Carolina coast for several days of spiritual retreat. Each day, I meditated and journaled, read scripture, talked on the phone with my spiritual director, and went birding. My scripture reading had me lingering over the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, particularly its sections on Abraham, that friend of God who lived according to God’s great promise, even though he never saw it fulfilled in his lifetime. My praying mostly took the form of gospel imagination, sitting with eyes closed and allowing stories from the Gospels to unfold in my mind as if I were there witnessing them. I had a particularly powerful experience imagining the baptism of Jesus. I found myself seeing the scene through the eyes of Jesus, looking up into the face of this other man – cousin, friend, and forerunner John – as he blessed me and lowered me into the water.

My spiritual director had advised me to read back through my journal on the last morning of the retreat and circle any phrases or words that stood out. This, he said, would help me to name some of fruits of

the time away, and it would also help shape the retreat into a memorable narrative that I could share with others. As I did this, sitting at the dining table listening to the morning calls of fish crows and mockingbirds and purple martins, mulling over Abraham and John the Baptist and my own inner stirring, I came to understand that God had placed a word on my heart for the upcoming year.

The word was *friendship*... and that surprised me.

It surprised me because for half a year the pandemic had severely limited my access to my friends, and I was going through a time of deep loneliness. It also surprised me because I already had an intuition – even though no plans had yet been laid – that my time in North Carolina was drawing to a close, that I'd soon be preparing to say goodbye to most of the friends and places and creatures I had come to love over the past seven years.

Then again, it *didn't* surprise me at all, because what I had been longing for, what was beckoning me out of present circumstances and into the unknown was a desire for greater intimacy with God, and for spiritual friends whose hopes for the world and convictions about the gospel might be more in harmony with my own. Plus, what had awakened those very longings in the first place was an exposure to the Church's ancient traditions of spiritual companioning and direction, where one person provides spiritual support to another over the long-haul.

So, despite the strange in-betweenness of the season, I trusted that *friendship* was to be my prayer and intention for the year ahead.

After I returned home to Durham, Sus and I learned that we were pregnant, that we'd be welcoming a little friend into our innermost circle. I began teaching high school and dove deep into relationships with my students. COVID vaccines rolled out just before Loren's birth, so we had some last lovely months of enjoying our friends and family in person, months made all the sweeter and weightier because we knew by

then that we were leaving. As we set off for Idaho, almost a year to do the day of my retreat, I realized that God's word of *friendship* had been both a benediction for one chapter of life and a prelude for the next. Friendship had steadied me and heightened my awareness of my own life during a pivotal and often uncertain time.

In his book, *The Four Loves*, the twentieth century British writer, C. S. Lewis, defines friendship as a relationship of affection built upon a shared sense of the good, true, and beautiful.

He says:

Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."

...The very condition of having Friends is that we should want something else besides Friends. Where the truthful answer to the question, "Do you see the same truth?" would be "I see nothing and I don't care about the truth; I only want a Friend," no Friendship can arise – though Affection of course may. There would be nothing for the Friendship to be about; and Friendship must be about something, even if it were only an enthusiasm for dominoes...

To Lewis, friends are those who stand beside another looking outward toward some common enjoyment or purpose or dream; he contrasts them with lovers who stand before one another and gaze into each other's faces. Friends seek a journey. Lovers seek union. We tend to become friends with folks who desire what we desire or enjoy what we enjoy, whether it's biking or quilting or navigating parenthood or laboring for a more equitable society.

*Could it have been for friendship that Jesus sent his disciples into the mission field two by two?* Out there in the villages, the disciples were prohibited from taking money and food and extra clothes, but they were *required* to take one another. While the staff may strike out against the bared teeth of a wild animal, it is the presence of the companion which strikes out against the inner afflictions of loneliness and fear.

Two by two, they travel and witness together, never alone in the joys and travails of following Jesus. In moments of insight and power, they give each other confirmation and grow a common memory. In moments of weakness, they bear one another's burdens. In moments of uncertainty, they discern together.

According to Mosaic Law, the testimony of two witnesses was required for verifying the truth of an event (Num 35:30; Deut. 19:15). Jesus joins that ancient idea of credible witness with his own radical emphasis on communion.

Almost nothing hounds ministry more than loneliness. In the Methodist system, clergy vow to be itinerant, moveable, and we carry the burdening knowledge that at any time we might be transplanted to a new place. We are appointed not two by two but one by one. So, I've had to learn to seek spiritual friendship in more stable and transferable relationships, such as with my spiritual director who I visit with over phone calls and Zoom, and in my partnership with Sus. Even so, I can't stop hoping to discover *in the local church itself* the shared witness and compounded joy that friendship makes possible.

And it's not just clergy who wrestle with loneliness in their walk of faith, or in life more generally. For many reasons, especially if we have been wounded by churches and other institutions, or if we have grave moral concerns that, when spoken aloud, fall upon deaf ears or frightened hearts in the Church, we can feel like there's no one else seeing what we see, no one else to say, "What? Me too. I thought I was

the only one!” We can feel adrift and discouraged without spiritual friends to walk beside us.

If that strikes a chord with you, if you are, at present, feeling lonely in your journey, I wonder if you would join me in learning how to pray for friends. It’s a scary prayer to pray because it’s so painful when unfulfilled, and it requires a lot of risk in bearing one’s soul to others in order to discover those resonant hearts. We must be willing to share what is dearest to us and seek its confirmation in another’s cry of recognition. It’s also risky because it’s an opening for the Spirit of God to bring to us those we may not have originally anticipated becoming friends with.

Oh, that the Church, that *this* church, would be a most-likely place to be secured a friend for the preaching and anointing and casting out works of ministry! May we be saved from the false intimacy of Jesus’ home community, who had him all boxed up in the prior assumptions about who he was, wrapped in their local lore, since he had grown up there: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?”

Oh, if you would say today: “I’m bearing a barely utterable grief,” may you hear a voice rise up from the body of this people saying, “What? Me too. I thought I was the only one!”

And if you would say, “The birds! The rivers! The mountains! God is in them, we must protect them for generations to come,” may you hear that sharp inhale of recognition.

And if you would say, “All must be made welcome here. Let’s make our crooked ways straight and our rough places as smooth as a plain,” may you find others quickly coming to your side with tools in hand.

And if you would say, “Into the silence. Into the quiet of prayer. I must press into the stillness of our God and there find my healing,” may you reach out and feel other hands lifted up there in the darkness.

It was a radical thing when Jesus said to his disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). Radical because in Jesus God has already chosen to be a loyal friend to every one of us. God in Christ has come down to our level, so that he might say to us, “What? I thought I was the only one!” And he has raised us up with him, so that we might say, “What? Me too!”

Jesus shares all that he has with us, all the hopes and aches and intentions of God. He knows all of us perfectly as his friends, and, through his friendship, he has *already* saved each of us from being “the only one.” Therefore, we can trust, we *must* trust, that he is able to send us partners, co-ministers, and companions for the journey.

Here is a mystery: we who are in Christ might at any time look up with his eyes into the eyes of a trusted friend – a friend waiting to hold and bless us; we who are in him might at any time dance as Abram did, solitary but not alone, underneath the starry sky.

Amen.