



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the more exquisite gifts in this world that we human beings receive is to have friends. And I love that process of making a new friend. You know, that beginning of the formation of a friendship, it's like this beautiful space where you get to discover the contours of another human being and you slowly begin to reveal to them who you are. And I love that exciting time when you're finding out all about this new person, what makes them so distinctively themselves, and you know what's kind of different from you. And you pay attention to the way that they manage to actually bring out something in you that helps you discover yourself again and realize who you are and how valuable you are.

And then you get to do things together. And after you do these wonderful events together, you ponder them, like you think about them. Like when you go out to a concert with them or you share a meal with them, or you have this really deep conversation or you have one of these like belly aching laughter sessions, right? These experiences, then you spend some time mulling over them and they begin to reverberate in your being as you play them back. And you slowly begin to fall in love with this new person, and soon a stranger becomes a friend.

I remember when I first met my friend Monica. We were both freshmen at Penn State. She was unassuming and I was loud. And I remember being drawn to her because she had this inordinate calm that was highly unusual for an 18-year-old, let alone 17-year-olds, which we happened to both be. And as I began to talk to her, I found myself being mysteriously drawn into her world. She was brilliant, clear-eyed. She had a way of stating things that just would make me laugh. I found her wildly intriguing and I loved the way that she would think of things. And I would always ask her, what do you think of this? And I would be eager to hear about how she would dissect a problem or an issue that I had.

But I was the yin to her yang, and I was always asking her to accompany me on some sort of jaunt that was guaranteed to take both of us out of our comfort zone. And as we spent more and more time together, we began to discover things about each other that we would find breathtakingly beautiful. And we discovered things about each other as well that we found a little strange. Monica loved math. I mean, like obsessively loved math. It was a little weird. She did become a math teacher. And I like to say really provocative things to her all the time, and we both

learned to love the strangeness of each other. It was just all part of that ancient experience of building a relationship and learning to love another human being.

I caught up with Monica last month and we hadn't chatted for years, and it was so good to hear her voice again. And these old patterns that we had returned. She made me laugh. I asked her the deep questions. She gave some thoughtful answers, and it just felt really good to be in her company again. I love it when you actually know the shape and the makeup of a human being so well that there's deep comfort and familiarity in their presence.

Do you and I have that same kind of relationship with the person Jesus? Do we recognize Jesus' habits, His way of being, His particularities so that we enjoy our relationship with Him? Do you have a deep comfort and familiarity with Him? Do you resonate with this wonderful person who is an intimate part of your life, or is He a stranger to you, bewildering and unrelatable?

And how may you cultivate a friendship with Jesus? Now, if that sounds kind of weird to you, let me remind you that this is exactly what those disciples were doing when they were with Jesus. They were all friends, right? They were a band of brothers. They lived together for three years. Now some of you have told me that you're watching that series, *The Chosen*. Our Women's Spirituality group is actually also watching it together, and it's this series that's now on its fourth season and it depicts the life of Jesus. And one of the beautiful ways it does so is it shows the disciples being friends with Jesus. It also shows how a relationship with Jesus changes your life.

Now, my job as your preacher is to share with you the good news about Jesus Christ, that our relationship with Jesus continues beyond death because of resurrection, and that Jesus is still actually building relationships with all of those who follow him and those who don't. So today I want to share with you two aspects of your relationship with Jesus that can make this stranger one of the most important persons in your life.

I want to help you to see Jesus for who He really is, to know and recognize His particular character, and to feel at home in His presence. And to experience what is breathtakingly beautiful about Him and what's a little strange about Him so that you can build your relationship with Jesus and fall in love. So the two things I want to tell you about your friend Jesus is number one, Jesus really wants you to be you and only you. And number two, expect surprises with your friend Jesus.

So first, a friendship with Jesus makes you be more you. I was really struck by this fresh when I was reading about the healing that was happening at Simon and Andrew's house. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is healed from this terrible fever. You know, I have to tell you, this was the first time that I read this passage that I had amazing and great empathy for the mother-in-law. And I think actually probably all of us do, because all of us have gone through some sort of form of Covid, RSV, or

those nasties that have been flying around that just absolutely knock us down and leave us in bed. Right? You remember that. You remember being stuck in bed and lying there, like you're thinking, I can't move. My head's pounding. My throat and nose are on fire. My whole body, including my toes hurt, and you're like, there's no way I'm getting out of bed, let alone hosting a dinner party for an entire village.

Now, I want you to imagine as you were feeling that way that Jesus walks into your bedroom. And He takes your hand and all of a sudden you leap up out of bed. It's as if Covid never happened to you. And that is exactly what happened to Peter's mother-in-law. And what is fascinating to me is that when Jesus heals her, makes her whole, makes her who she's supposed to be, she is not made a better version of herself after the healing. Jesus simply returns her to being herself and she knows what to do. She knows how to create beautiful spaces for other people to thrive and be healed. And then Jesus just keeps doing that same thing with all the other people He meets. He brings them back to themselves.

And this is extraordinary to me. I think too often we hear that we need to change in order to be who God wants us to be. You know what? I think I've actually said that a couple times myself in this pulpit, and here we have Jesus simply returning people to themselves. I mean, He could do all kinds of things to us, but He's not interested. I find this one of the most captivating things about our friend Jesus. Jesus really wants you to be you. Jesus finds not only are you fully sufficient in the way you are, but Jesus spends all this divine energy making sure that you get to be who you are.

You know that part about the casting out of demons? I hadn't thought about this until I put on this lens of how Jesus wants us to be. I always thought the casting out of demons was really important to note because it shows that Jesus can get rid of those spirits that are trying to do us harm. But what I failed to see until now is that with all of those who are demon possessed, Jesus never rebukes the person, right? He saves the person. They're allowed to be themselves finally without this other spirit impeding them. And it's like he gives you and me permission to be who we are in this world. And that's what God blesses.

And I think it's actually the reason that next week we have the largest group of identifying women who are going on retreat, and the retreat's theme is, you are enough. And that's the good news that Jesus keeps telling us, you are profoundly beautiful. You are a little strange. And that's the person that Jesus wants to have a relationship with, which brings me to the second thing that you should know about your friendship with Jesus. Expect surprises. This is so central to Jesus's character, Jesus's nature, Jesus's way because it's so central to God's character, God's nature, God's way. The Lord tells the prophet Isaiah, my ways are not your ways, and that is not a threat, but a promise. It means that whenever we zig, Jesus

will zag. It means that when we think we know something is happening, we realize we actually have no idea what's happening.

And the good news is that all of these surprises are always for our sake, our welfare, our salvation. I don't know about you, but as I spend more and more time with God, I realize just how mysterious, mischievous, and mystical God truly is. And there are days that I find that maddening, and there are days that I find that charming. But either way, I have found that trusting Jesus is the best way for me to find peace, no matter the circumstances, since I never know what he's going to do.

And I imagine like those disciples, that's what they were going through. They had to figure out way early in the morning with the whole village at Peter's doorstep, where the heck did Jesus go? And surprise! He's missing. And then they go running to go find Him. And they finally hunt Him down and there's another surprise. He tells them, pack up, we're leaving. And what do they do? They trust Jesus. Even though I'm sure they hadn't expected that outcome. With Jesus, there's always this, wow, I did not see that coming experience you have with Him. Jesus is steadfast, but there's always this element of adventure and risk with Him. So expect the unpredictable with your friend Jesus. It certainly makes your relationship way more interesting.

There's an old hymn, What a Friend We Have in Jesus. It was written by Joseph Scriven in the 1800s. Now, Joseph had a really tough life. Things really never went his way. His first fiancé, she died in a drowning accident on the eve of their wedding. And 11 years later, he was given another love of his life and that second fiancé had a short illness right before they got married and she died. And Joseph himself, he struggled with depression. He had a hard time keeping jobs and he often had to depend on his friends for a place to stay. So when he wrote What a Friend We Have in Jesus, Lord knows that this man needed a friend, and so he pens about Jesus:

Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer!

It is truly a gift to have friends.

Amen.