



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Holy Friendship

SCRIPTURE:  
2 Timothy 4:9-22

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October 16, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr., and Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**Rodger:** For years, friendship in America has been on a decline. That trend accelerated during the pandemic. In a New York Times article in June, Catherine Pearson reported that according to a Gallup poll, 12% of American adults said they had no close friends. A frequently cited meta-analysis by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, concluded that loneliness and social isolation can lead to increased incidences of depression, anxiety, heart disease and stroke. She said that friendship is as health relevant as getting sleep and exercising.

In this preaching series, we have been exploring spiritual practices—things we do to grow in our faith. We have talked about reading and studying the Bible, seeking and speaking truth, praying, going on pilgrimages and the great co-mission. Today we're talking about holy friendship—about friendship as a spiritual practice. And we are focusing on this letter from Paul to Timothy.

**Tom:** In this letter, Paul writes knowing that his days are numbered. It has been my experience that there is a clarity that often comes when we know the end is near. Paul begins to think about the people in his life. It's almost as if he is looking up at the mantel over his fireplace and a collection of photographs of the people who have impacted his life. Paul gathers in his mind the people who matter the most to him. People who have been his fellow travelers, people who have learned from him and people who have been his teachers in the faith. He gathers his friends.

"Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him as he is useful. Give my love to Prisca and Aquila." He is rehearsing the people he loves and those who have

loved him. Admittedly, he is also remembering some of the challenges in this life because challenges bring their own learnings in faith. "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm. He will answer to God for that. And when I went to trial, most abandoned me, but God carried me through," he says.

But the point of the letter is to call on Timothy. He says, "More than anything else, Timothy, I need to see you one more time. Come before winter. I don't know if I will make it another winter. It would do my heart good if I could see you one more time."

This is the clarity that comes to Paul's mind when he knows his time in this world is coming to an end. The work he has done matters. The offerings he has made in the world, they are significant. The truth is: You and I would not likely be Christian if it weren't for the ministry of the apostle Paul who felt a burning call to bring the gospel to gentiles. But even for this great saint of the church, when it comes to the end of his days, what matters most is the friends he has made in his life. Friendship is holy work.

**Rodger:** Friendship is holy work. I love that image you have given us of the portraits on the mantel. We often talk about how we cannot do this Christian journey alone. We need one another. This letter from Paul to Timothy is a testament to holy friendship. This is a testament to the truth that faith lives in the space between self and the other. This is what makes friendship holy. This is what makes holy friendship a spiritual practice.

What strikes me about these words is how poignant they are. They are heartfelt words. They are very likely the last words that Paul writes as he nears death. It is so clear that Paul loves Timothy. They have been through so much together. The plea to come to him as soon as possible, to make the long

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journey to him, is a powerful admission of Paul's need. I've written a letter like this one.

Twenty-seven years ago, I found myself needing holy friendship. At the encouragement of a mentor, I had been meeting with a therapist and the conversations were not helping. So he suggested that I try something different. He suggested that I invite a small group of people, whom I loved and respected and who loved and respected me, to covenant to pray for me and meet with me. Our pattern has been to keep in touch throughout the year. And then, once a year, we meet in a house on a beach either in North Carolina or California for a couple of days where I open my whole life to them—body, mind and spirit. They call it the “Rodger Days” because they are all focused on me and it is both terrifying and grace-filled. They ask me hard questions. They hold me accountable. They bless me. They love me. I tell them where I have failed and they forgive me. I tell them how I have grown and they cheer for me. We take long walks and eat some good food and laugh and cry and worship and share communion. The group was as large as seven, but one has died and gone on to heaven. And three years ago, another had a stroke and can no longer travel. I can tell you more than once they have saved my life. Friendship is hard work and it is holy work.

**Tom:** I, too, have written this letter. “I need you now.” But on occasion, I have also received a letter like this. It goes both ways in friendship. In another epistle, Paul says, “Bear one another's burdens.” It's a good description of friendship. In friendship, we stand with those who need us, but if it is a real friendship, we will from time to time find ourselves being the one in need. The apostle Paul was strong and often fearless, but here we find him saying to his friend, “I need you now. Come see me, come before winter.”

I got that letter a few years ago—it actually came as a phone call. Dr. Bob Meneilly was a giant. He graduated from Pittsburgh Seminary and came to Prairie Village in 1947. It was more prairie than village in those days. He gave not only his whole ministry but in many ways, his whole life to loving this church. He was a saint in shoes and lived an

unparalleled ministry.

He called me and said, “Tom, I want you to come see me when you have a moment.” It was the first time in my memory that he made a phone call like that. Like Paul, Bob sensed that the end was coming. I realized when I sat with him that he had called me to say goodbye. He spoke of how weary he was. He spoke of his appreciation for his children, all grown and anything but children, but when he needed them most, they made sure no need was left unaddressed. He wanted to talk about heaven and we wondered together what it will be like. He spoke of how ready he was to see his beloved Shirley again. Few men have loved their wives like Bob loved Shirley. He was so ready to be with her. And then we spoke of our love for each other. I told him that there was no way for him to have been more supportive of me than he had been. Like Timothy with Paul, he had become something like a father to me and I loved him.

And then the conversation turned and we spoke of our love for you. We talked of holy moments and the wonder of what God has done in and through this church. We spoke of the privilege we both feel in having served you over the decades. It was one of the more meaningful conversations I have had in my life. But it is also true that we said nothing that day we hadn't already said to one another.

I think we see in this passage from Paul that in coming to the end of his life he gains clarity. The accomplishments he has achieved, they matter. The contributions that he offered the world, they add up. But what makes us who we are—and what makes a human life human—is love. It is what our days are for.

So in these last words of the apostle, we are taught to pay attention to our friendships. Don't be casual. Friendship is something we practice. And of course, the clarity that the apostle finds at the end should instruct us not just when our days are coming to an end, but every day. Faith calls us to remember the importance of the people in our lives; the importance to love and be loved. Friendship is holy work.

So in the days to come, think about who those people are. To whom do you need to write a letter? Or send a text? Pay attention to that and God will show up in the midst of it.

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**Rodger:** So over these Sundays, we have shared together the importance of spiritual practices to enliven and sustain us in our faith. We read and study the Bible. We discern and tell the truth. We pray. We go on pilgrimages. We embody the mission of Jesus Christ. And today we have given you a little tool, a nudge, to practice friendship. Ways to contact

those who matter in your life. Like Paul, we bear one another's burdens. So, your contact may be with someone who needs to hear from you. Or it may be someone with whom you need to connect. Remember: Practicing friendship is holy work. Pray with us.

**Tom:** O Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.