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The National Presbyterian Church

**Fellow Followers: “Barnabas and Andrew –  
You’ve Got a Friend”**

John 1:41-42, 6:5-11; Acts 9:26-28, 11:19-26

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In our sermons through the summer we’re looking together at people whose stories are told for us in the pages of Holy Scripture. Scripture is not just a book of theology. It’s not just a book of prayers. It’s not just a book of rules and regulations. It’s a book that is filled with stories, and those stories have been preserved for us because we so often find our path in life through a story that we have been taught or learned. We go back in history and the stories in history influence and shape who we are. We look back in time, or to the present time, and our families’ shape who we are. And when we are looking at the people whose stories are preserved for us in scripture, we are looking at members of our family, our family by faith. They are our ancestors in the faith (the Bible in some senses is like [ancestors.com!](http://ancestors.com)), and we find out who we are and who we are to become by knowing who they were.

Of course at the center of our story and our family is our brother and savior, Jesus Christ: his story is to influence us more than that of anybody else. But his character and image are so high! He is the ultimate standard. And we need that standard – but sometimes we need others who are more down to earth, more on our level, so that we can learn not only from their goodness but from their mistakes as well; and scripture is filled stories of people like this as well.

So we’ve been looking at stories of average people who have a faith in God, and from whom we can learn. And we come today to the stories of two characters, Andrew and Barnabas, who are in the Biblical accounts but who are certainly not on the center of the stage. We might call Andrew and Barnabas supporting actors. But from their lives, too, we learn how to live. In particular, the characteristic that emerges from their lives that is of prime importance is the characteristic of friendship: friendship. And through that friendship God does marvelous things. It may seem to be small, it may seem to be insignificant, but God was at work through Barnabas and Andrew through this simple characteristic of friendship.

We see this, for example, in one of the great miracles in the Bible, one of the two which is in all four gospels (the other is the resurrection) – the feeding of a great crowd of over 5,000 people by our Lord Jesus Christ. This simply would not have happened were it not for Andrew and the friendship he showed to a little boy. Well, I’m sure God could have worked it out some other way – but let me put it this way: God chose in this case to work out his miracle, initiate the process that led to the miracle through a simple friendship. Friendship from Jesus’ follower, Andrew, working the crowd, making friends with people, and finding a little boy who had some

loaves and fishes, and then gaining the boy's trust so that he would leave whoever he was with, and come with Andrew to Jesus, and freely give away what he had, as a gift to the Savior. It was only then that Jesus set to work, and began to multiply the offering of five loaves and two fish. A little aside – Andrew and a boy – a vignette on friendship which grows to become a miracle that touches thousands of people; and then through the story recorded in scripture, touches millions from that day to this.

Or think of the impact of Barnabas (of whom we read in Acts 9 and 11) on a man called Paul (his Greek name), or Saul (his Hebrew name). Paul becomes the writer of almost half the books in the New Testament. He becomes the quintessential first century ambassador of the faith, the missionary who takes the gospel from Palestine all the way through Turkey, modern day Turkey, and across to modern day Macedonia and Greece, and then to Rome (others have gone to Rome before him, but he brings the gospel there as well) and quite possibly he goes to Spain (we don't know the whole story). But Paul is a person who impacts all kinds of lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and from whom we too have received the gospel, hundreds, thousands of years later. But this may not have happened were it not for the friendship of Barnabas for Paul.

You see, when Paul became a Christian, nobody trusted his conversion. He was not welcomed in the Christian household. He could have remained an outcast. Before his conversion he had been a persecutor of the church. Public enemy number one, hating Christ whom he believed was blaspheming the name of God and hating the followers of Christ as well. Persecuting them, killing them, putting them in jail. And all of a sudden he becomes a Christian, but no one is sure what to make of his conversion! – Do you believe it or don't you? Is this a ploy? Is he just going to find another way to infiltrate the church in order to destroy it? And the early Christians, many of them thought that's exactly what was going on there; except for Barnabas, who befriends Paul, and brings him into the inner circle of the church in Jerusalem, led by Jesus' brother, James, and through those relationships, in a way neither Barnabas nor Paul could have conceived, starts a missionary movement which would have an enormous impact on the world. Friendships can do that: its impact starts small, like a grain of mustard seed, but can grow big in ways that we cannot imagine or control.

Among all the virtues that we might speak about, it seems that friendship is really a lightweight virtue. Friendship seems to be small, for example, compared to the great virtues of faith and love and courage and integrity – these seem to have a strength about them, or a robustness about them, that mere friendship may not seem to have. So we may very easily dismiss friendship as a subject that is not really worth bothering about. But before we do that, we need to keep in mind that even the Greek philosophers did not dismiss friendship as a lightweight virtue, but explored it at length.

- Go back in time to the time before Jesus and you'll find the Greek Epicurean philosophers looking upon friendship as one of the greatest gifts that you could have. If you wanted to know the good life, to know what was involved in the good life, a life well-lived, you needed friendship.

And then you move forward to times closer to our own and you've got poets and songwriters and authors who are writing about and singing about friendship. It's not quite as lightweight as it may appear at first.

- So you find the poet Robert Frost calling us to pay attention to friendship when he speaks about walls that keep on crumbling down: "Something there is that does not like a wall!" They keep crumbling down, he says, the walls or fences between neighbors. But some people say "Well, you've got to have good fences to have good neighbors!" And I'd agree: there's some truth in that. But, still, he says, "You have to ask, why is it that they keep crumbling down? Maybe there's a message in that as well he suggests, so that neighborliness, friendship, needs to transcend whatever wall it is that stands between us?"
- Or think of some children's books. Perhaps one that you may have read, it's now almost a 100 years old. Over 90 years old: *The Velveteen Rabbit*. I don't know if any of you have read The Velveteen Rabbit, or have read it to your children or grandchildren. It's about friendship – about a little boy and his friendship with his rabbit; with this little cloth creature. It's about the importance and value of friendship; read to children from generation to generation.
- Or you go back some 45 years to 1971 and Carole King begins to write and sing about friendship – made more famous perhaps by James Taylor. Some of us carry this in our heads (well, it's one of my all-time favorites). It goes like this (no, I'm not going to sing it)

*When you're down in troubles, and you need some love and care  
and nothing, nothing is going right,  
close your eyes and think of me, and soon I will be there  
to brighten even your darkest night.  
You just call out my name and you know wherever I am  
I'll come running to see you again;  
winter, spring, summer or fall all you gotta do is call  
and I'll be there. Yes I will. You've got a . . . a friend.*

Great tune, but also a great message! We have a need for friendship in our lives that cuts across all human boundaries. So this lightweight virtue or characteristic is actually not so lightweight after all.

**We have a need for friendship** in our lives which is deep and profound and shared by all. In fact, it's so deeply ingrained in the human psyche that Frances Schaeffer in his book Death In The City, once wrote that it points us to God, to our need of God, and, to a certain extent, to the existence of God. His view is somewhat like Saint Augustine's view that there is a great hole, a cavity in our lives that we seek to fill with all kinds of things. Some of them are bad, some of them are good; but they are all inadequate. What we need, what we were created for, he says, is the infinite friendship of God. Or to put it another way, the hungering and the longing that we have for friendship here on Earth is the small version of the much larger passion in our lives for our lives to be filled with a friendship that is infinite (that only God can supply); nothing else

will fill the deep void and need in our lives. But this need for the divine begins on the human level, the horizontal level, with the need for friendship in general (with those made in God's image) – and leads us inevitably to the other side of the coin: our need not only *for* friendship, but *to give* friendship, share friendship, be a friend! If we need a friend, then someone else needs us to be that friend for them too!

And this is a call -- ***to be a friend***—that we need to take seriously, as did Barnaba and Andrew. In a sense it's a call to become like God – the God who befriends us whether we deserve it or not; the God who says to us through Jesus Christ (John 15:15) “I could keep on calling you my servants, but I want to share everything with you. And if I share everything with you you're not just my servants you my friends. I have called you my friends.”

God wants to befriend us: the story of “the incarnation” is really a story about how God doesn't just want to be up in heaven theologizing, but wants to be right down here, brushing shoulders with us in flesh and blood in friendship. And this God wants to do whether we're significant to anyone else, or feel significant, or not. Whether we deserve it or not, God wants to befriend us, and is willing to take an enormous risk both in the incarnation (in becoming flesh and blood) and in his death, to do so. He will go to any lengths, God will, any lengths, to become a friend with you and me.

The story of the incarnation is the story of God's passion to befriend us. And so too is the story of the atonement: Christ's death on the cross for us. We often speak about Jesus' death in terms of the atonement: he dies on the cross to forgive us our sins and take our guilt away – and this is certainly true. But there's a sense in which these two things – the removal of guilt and sin – are only a means to an end, not the end in itself. Of course God gives us forgiveness through Christ! And of course he does not want us to wallow in guilt! But the ultimate purpose of the cross is not just our freedom from condemnation, or from feeling bad about ourselves! The ultimate purpose is reconciliation in our relationship with God. Or to put it negatively, there is no reconciliation if there is no forgiveness and if lingering guilt remains. He comes to take sin and guilt away so that we can be reconciled to God in a bond of friendship that nothing can break.

God's passion is a passion for friendship with you and me, and he calls us to share that passion for friendship with others. Not only to know our own need of friends, but our need to be a friend to others.

For some it's pretty tough to become a friend to others. For others it's easy; they make friends quite naturally. For all of us at times, though, within this call to be friends there are things which stand in our way; obstacles that stand in the way of our being the friends God wants us to be, or of our being like God in his friendship to us.

One word – though I think it's really two words – can be used to describe a common obstacle which comes in the way of friendship is the word prejudice. It's really the combination of two words: “pre” and “judging.” When we have prejudice, we pre-judge.

- Why is it that we are not friends with more people (and I use this term not just in terms of racial prejudice)?
- Why is it that we are not friends with more people than we have?
- Well, yes, maybe for some of us it's just plain difficult; but so often, for all of us, it's because we pre-judge another. We form an opinion about another before we actually get to know them, and it stops us in our tracks, or it makes it harder for us to enter into a relationship with them.

And this is a fight – against pre-judging – that we will have all our lives long on one level or another; a fight which surely forces us to go back to the God who will do anything to be our friend, and to say to him “Help me deal with this pre-judging, help me move beyond it, knowing I myself am a sinner whom you could so easily have pre-judged too.”

So we look back to Andrew's example and Andrew in his relationship with his fellow disciples. In their case the issue of prejudice was primarily evident in a prejudging of children. Children! There are many societies in which children are not valued at all. Children are weak and some see them as available to be used for whatever purposes one intends to use them for. This may be hard for us to see in our society in which we generally honor children, but there are certainly pockets in our society in which children are not treated with value, and do not receive the attention or care which most of us received in childhood, and which enabled us to become the adults we are. But think back, for example to the days of Charles Dickens – and *Oliver Twist* – and the portrayal of children in which children were really nothing; to be used for anything; to be cast off in one direction or another.

ANDREW: It may not have been quite that bad in the days of Jesus or Andrew and the disciples, but certainly when the children came to Jesus and he was teaching, the disciples as a whole told them to go away (Matthew 19:14), as if to say, “Jesus has no time for you. Jesus' teaching, our adult business, is more important than your coming to Jesus at this time.” And you may remember that Jesus said “Not so, not so!” – undermining this kind of common presumption: “Not so. Let the children come to me.” And as if to underline the fact that he not only likes children but thinks they are worthy of his and God's friendship, he adds, “For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven!” That is, Jesus implies that the act of friendship for the seemingly insignificant was critical not just to him but to the divine plan of redemption: “You must not pre-judge them or think you are more important than them or that they are insignificant and therefore can be simply pushed away!” And Andrew gets it. Andrew picks up on this. And so when he's working the crowd that is sitting on the hillside above the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and when he sees that they're hungry, he's the one who notices the child and builds a relationship with this one deemed by others to be insignificant – not worth it, not worth friendship or giving any time to – and through this relationship or friendship, brings him to Jesus. And something wonderful emerges from there.

BARNABAS: Friendship, of course, is harder in the case of Barnabas and his relationship with Paul. I mean Paul really had been a nasty piece of work. He really was dangerous. He really

had hurt Christians, put some to death and thrown others in jail. There was a real risk involved in Barnabas' friendship with Paul. The conversion could have been a ploy and a prelude for more persecution. But Barnabas' God was the Father of Jesus Christ who risked everything, everything, to become friends with you and me. And perhaps for that reason, even when others weren't willing to take that risk, Barnabas was. He was able to look past the possibility that this could all be a trap and to say my friendship with him is my response to the gospel of Jesus Christ as I understand it. And risky though it may be I will take that step. He approaches Paul, introduces him to others and a whole sequence of wonderful things begins to take place because of that first step, a step of simple friendship.

All of us here today are fully aware of the desperately sad and awful news coming from Charleston coming from South Carolina in the past ten days or so. The devastating loss of nine wonderful people, vibrant people, each without malice seeking to create "a more perfect union" in every walk of life, whether in government or in church or in school or in a library or in the family. All of us have been made aware of the terrible power of prejudice and pre-judging (and I'll say it again: I prefer the two words, pre-judging, because sometimes we're prejudiced against the word "prejudice"!)

Pre-judging – *the simple act of defining who somebody is before we have a chance to be a friend.* We've seen the devastating effects of that, the terrible power, to put it another way, the terrible power of the absence of the passion for friendship, which is built into the Gospel, or ought to be. For this is precisely who God has been and is for us – the one who has every right to pre-judge us, but chooses not to. And we have been called to show that same passion for friendship and love to others. Any others. And all without prejudice.

We've seen this downside of the absence of friendship. Fortunately, we've also been privileged in recent days to see the upside as well. We've seen the power of the Gospel, a demonstration of the power of the gospel far beyond any sermon like this, to a whole nation; the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ when people really believe it. The power of friendship in the simple step of welcoming Dylann Roof into a Bible study.

So often, to take it out of that present context, even when we form friendships, perhaps even overcoming some prejudice, we still too easily form barriers that stop people from getting into our group or clique.

So here is friendship which is expansive, which opens up and allows others in. And it's truly the embodiment of the Gospel that God wants each of us to know, and that reflects what God has done for us. God does not say "My circle of friends is full. You cannot come in." He says to us "The door is open through Jesus Christ, walk on in." The atonement is not just about forgiveness it's about reconciliation. And we've seen this same passion in flesh and blood. We've seen the power of forgiveness and mercy in the face of families facing indescribable loss, the passion for relationships to be healed, which affects not only the private sphere but the public sphere so that it spreads throughout communities.

Some of you know that before coming here for five years I and my wife lived in South Carolina, and for many more years in the South. There is a passion; there

is a passion for reconciliation in Charleston which is powerful. Try to do it by law, try to do it by legislation (and there's a time for that) and it doesn't work, at least as a first step. But when something is unleashed which is holy and wonderful, especially in the face of devastation, things can begin to change which previously had been immovable, and would never have changed otherwise.

Friendship may seem to be a small matter, and its ramifications insignificant. But once that's the step that is taken and pre-judging is placed to the side, God finds a way to walk through a door that sometimes has been closed for a long time. Whether it's in the sphere of race relations, whether it's in relations with children or whether it's just within our families within whom we live and move and have most of our being.

We all need it, friendship, at some time in our lives. Even if we're loners and self-sufficient and we think we can go it alone, there is a time when we all need that other person to come to us, and when we need God to come to us. But that need in ourselves is also the need in somebody else too – who needs not only God, but you and me, to be their friend.

It's not always easy. It's easier for some than for others. But every single one of us makes friendship harder when we allow pre-judging to come into our minds about this person or that. Like Andrew and Barnabas, let's ask God to help us cast aside whatever pre-judging we are prone to, and copy the God who calls us – who moved heaven and earth in order to be our friend, and whose passion is to help us become a friend to others too. Perhaps, with this simple act, God will use us, as he did with Andrew and Barnabas, to start something far bigger for God than we can begin to imagine.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God look down upon us and upon your world in great pain in all kinds of places. Continue to strengthen brothers and sisters in Christ who face indescribable pain and help us where we are, to hand over all our thoughts, our prejudging thoughts to you and to find strength as you found strength and risked your life to be our friend to be friends to others; we pray in your name Lord Jesus. Amen.

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