

Lord, you have been our dwelling place<sup>[a]</sup>  
in all generations.<sup>2</sup> Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Psalm 90:1-2

I have loved you with an everlasting love.. (Jeremiah 31:3)

Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.  
(Isaiah 49:15b-16a)

I have called you by name and you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1b)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17 excerpts)

“I do not call you servants any longer... I call you friends. Just as the Father sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. “ (John 15:15, John 20:21)

People of God, gathered at BMC, receive this good news...

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“Throughout the scriptures God comes to humanity, loves humanity, speaks and stays in conversation with people, with you and with me, whether we recognize it or not.” *Jesus, Our Spiritual Director, Wendy Miller.*

Imagine your life then, as one long conversation with God.

Thomas, the great straight shooter of Jesus’ disciples – grappled with exactly how we humans keep up our end of this life long conversation with God. One day, Jesus told his friends not to worry, believe in God, Jesus’ is looking after things, the disciples will know the way, they’ll know what to do and where to go and how it all works. Thomas listens, and then exclaims: “Lord, we don’t actually know where you’re going, we don’t know the way. How can you expect us to know this stuff, to keep up our end of the conversation with God?”

Jesus responds...”Thomas, I am the way. Knowing me is knowing God.”

We’re in the midst of a worship series: Learning to Keep Company With Jesus and week by week, we’re talking about different spiritual practices that might help us learn to recognize the voice of the Spirit of God speaking in our lives. And kind of like a 7<sup>th</sup> inning stretch – it might be helpful to pause and ask – what’s it been like for you so far?

Some of you have hung these blue cloths in your homes or at work to help you remember to live Jesus’ way of peace that we’re also invited to walk... (stories)

We have talked about choosing to slow down so that we might be able to notice how we’re living our lives, notice our world, and ask how we’re in conversation with God. (stories)

Some of you are working on practicing gratitude, the 10<sup>th</sup> leper moment – slowing enough to look at your life, at the world and around and come back and say thank you to the One who is the Divine Giver. (stories)

Some of you have developed an even more conflicted love hate relationship with your cell phone and computer and are practicing turning them off so you can tune into relationships with others and with God. (stories?)

Some of you are reflecting on fasting from food or attitudes or habits with fresh eyes – asking how might fasting, denying your self something, make space to open yourself to be filled with something else, namely how might you feast on the Living God? (stories)

God is the wild, untameable Word...the true Living God – Spiritual practices aren't magic formulas – we can't control God or our relationship with God through these practices. Instead, these practices offer us ways to show up to our own lives and they offer us a place and a rhythm to grow and deepen our desire to simply be with God and live in the world as God invites us to live.

## Spiritual Friendship

If we can imagine our lives as being one long conversation with God, a conversation that happens deep within our souls yet includes every part of our ordinary days – then won't we need others to help us listen, to wait with us, to answer with us?

Imagine Mary running to Elizabeth after she accepted the role to carry the son of God. Their conversation when Elizabeth met Mary at the door took place at a deeply personal level – “oh my gosh – the child in my womb leaped for joy when I saw you – Blessed are you Mary – about to become the mother of God.” I'm guessing not many of Mary's other young teenage friends might have been able to go where Elizabeth, who shared the journey, was able to go.

Or what about Jonathan risking his relationship with his father Saul, because he knew that David, his dearest friend, was anointed by God. He loved him, the book of Samuel writes, as his own soul.

And when God came among us in Jesus, Jesus chose to circle himself with soul companions, the twelve disciples as well as a closer inner circle of three who were with him on the mountaintop of joy and with him in the garden of despair.

This journey walking the way of Jesus – is meant to be shared – needs to be shared.

Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, “He who sets himself up at his own teacher, becomes the pupil of a fool”.

Take a minute – and think about one person in your life that offers you a safe, non-judgemental place where you feel like you are really listened to as you share the truth about your life and your feelings about your life?

Think of one person whom you already or think you *could* talk to about your relationship with God, your deepest longings – about your prayers, about whether God feels close or far away? (was it the same person – or a different person – or could you think of anyone at all)

The practice of spiritual friendships, intentional friendships with another person or a 2 or 3 other people, is meant to create a safe place where we can learn together to actively engage in this life long conversation with God.

To enter into spiritual friendship you **don't** have to be an expert at scripture, theology or prayer. You need a simple desire to grow, and a willingness to learn how to share your life at a level deeper than just opinion and information and a willingness to learn to listen for God in another person's life.

At SJMC, I was able to help birth a number of spiritual friendships – responding to longings that people expressed. All the groups were different. For example, there was a group for women who had each experienced the death of a loved one. Week by week one woman would introduce their beloved one who had died, and the rest of us would simply listen to their story, ask questions and sit together in the company of Jesus the healer - with tears and laughter. Sometimes there was no special word but thank you for sharing your story – it helps me understand my own experience better. At no time in my 21 years of ministry have I grown in love of and gratitude to God like I did as the facilitator of that group of women. That was the only spiritual friendship group I facilitated.

A men's group was formed that still meets for breakfast. They are similar in age – and have met every other week or as they are able to for close to 5 years now. They share things like how work is going, their marriages, their 5 year plans, their sorrows and struggles. It was a more informal group – but recently I asked Gerald how he'd talk about it – and he said it is the most safe friendship circle he has with an intentional focus on the deeper things of life.

I am a part of two significant spiritual friendships. One is just one on one, one is a group of 3 women. All are women pastors – and we gather to listen to each other's journey and to listen for the movement of God in our lives. They are safe places without judgment, rather deep compassion and challenge when it seems appropriate.

It could be friendship circled around a shared journey, a friendship circled around another practice – maybe you and the other(s) want to try slowing down or fasting or unplugging and simply want a safe and honest place to share how it's going and to listen for where God may be speaking in the midst of the practicing.

We'll talk more in worship response – for now – I simply hi-light spiritual friendship as another practice to help us keep listening to the ongoing conversation with God called our life.

I give God thanks for a community and dear friends with whom to share the journey.