In preparation for this sermon, I took a stroll down the aisle of a local greeting cards store. Here are some definitions I found for “Friendship”. A friend is:

*Someone who will keep your secrets and never divulge them---even if tormented or tempted with chocolate;*
*Someone who will quietly destroy the photograph that makes you look like a beached whale;*
*Someone who knows that you don’t know what you’re talking about but will let you reach that conclusion independently;*
*Someone who goes on the same diet with you---and off it with you, too.*

That last one reminds me of Erma Bombeck’s description of a friend as “somebody who doesn’t go on a diet when you are fat.”

We’ve reached the sixth and last of our series on Real Life Faith with today’s consideration of “Faith and Our Friends.” From the time we first become aware of other people in this world, fewer things are more important to us than our friends. Someone once said that the three most important decisions we make are the God whom we choose to worship, the person we decide to commit ourselves to, and the people we pick as our friends.

At last night’s Cabaret for Missions, we discovered that a friend is worth a whopping $12---the average price per person of hors d’oeuvres for twenty purchased by one bidder. But we know that they are worth so much more. It made me think of a newspaper cartoon in which the first frame shows a thief wearing a mask with his gun pointed at a frightened victim. In the next scene the robber holds out a sack and says, "Give me all of your valuables!" In the next scene the victim begins stuffing into the sack all of his friends.

Just think how poorer you’d be without them. In Dante's *Inferno*, the nethermost depth of hell is that place where individuals are frozen in ice, unable to have the companionship of any other person. No one is a rock or an island. No, friends are essential for our spiritual and psychological health, particularly when life is unkind to us. As someone said, “I don't need friends in fair weather. I need friends in foul weather.”

And studies are now showing that friendships are important to our physical health as

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well. According to current research, having friends is good for our immune system. People who have friends are sick less often than those who have no friends. They live longer. And they are happier.

A British publication once offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. Among the thousands of answers received were the following:

"One who multiplies joys, divides grief, and whose honesty is inviolable."
"One who understands our silence."
"A volume of sympathy bound in cloth."

The winning definition read: "A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out."

If you want to find out who your friends really are, I can tell you very easily how to do it—just make a mistake. One wise person said, "In prosperity our friends know us, but in adversity we know our friends." And that includes the adversity that we go through at times in our friendships. There are those wonderful lyrics in the song from Wicked that Heather and Leslie sang last night, when, after a long an tumultuous time, two adversaries who have become friends sing:

\[
\begin{align*}
  \text{Who can say if I've been changed for the better?} \\
  \text{But because I knew you} \\
  \text{I have been changed for good ...}
\end{align*}
\]

Like all friends who have weathered stormy times, Elphaba and Glinda, two very different people, are better for having known one another. They have been changed for good. Can’t we say that about our best friends, those who have stuck with us like glue through all the wicked changes and challenges life puts us through?

This church is filled with friends like that. Folks who will share in the fun times like last night and also be there for you when you’re sick, or alone, or not sure where to turn. If you’ve never experienced the power of that sort of friendship, hang around here long enough and you will.

One of the marks of friends like these is that though they may point out your faults from time to time, they will overlook them and never let them come between you. Henry Ward Beecher gave some good advice: "You ought to keep a big cemetery in your backyard where you can bury the faults of your friends.” We all need friends who will be honest with us. But we need that honesty tempered by support and genuine concern for our well-being. Real friends know that we have our soft spots and vulnerable places as much as they do.

Diana Craik expressed the wonder of deep, accepting friendship when she wrote:
Oh the comfort—
The inexpressible comfort
of feeling safe with a person;
Having neither to weigh thoughts
Nor measure words—but pouring them
all right out—just as they are—
Chaff and grain together—
Certain that a faithful friend will
take them and sift them—
Keeping what is worth keeping—
and with a breath of kindness
Blow the rest away.

This sort of faithful friendship makes me think of a particular sort we speak about in our tradition. It’s called spiritual friendship, or “Christian companionship”—having a friend with whom we can share our Christian journey. Someone who will keep us in touch with our spiritual lives. In Celtic Christianity, such friendship is called anam chara, a soul friend. We can all use a soul friend, someone who, whether by intent or just in how they are, helps us to go to the deepest places of who we are.

Spiritual companionship is a wonderful way to think about how we can relate to friends. And so is this: “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus was talking to those whom he no longer called servants or disciples but friends, and what he was about to do in his ultimate act of friendship.

Remember that old saying, “A friend in need is a friend indeed”? What made Jesus such a good friend to those disciples who often did not get the point of his message and to all of us who still struggle to embrace it is how his actions matched his words. He wouldn’t just tell them how to love; he would show them on the cross. He was a friend in deed. “Greater love has no one that his…” Why was Christ willing to make such a sacrifice? Obviously he thinks his friends are worth it.

It is this dimension of sacrifice that moves relationships from casual acquaintance to deep spiritual bond. Those who are willing to give of themselves form lasting friendships. When we lay down our lives for each other, we offer the greatest gift that any of us has to offer. It may not come in the form of going to a cross, but it will at least in some small way put to death our own self-interest for the sake of another—which is no small thing at all.

After he left the presidency and retired to his home in Missouri, Harry Truman would often go on walks with his neighbor, a Presbyterian minister. The minister tells the story of a cold, February day late in Mr. Truman’s life. The minister was officiating at a burial service for an elderly gentleman. It was cold, the wind was blowing and literally no one showed up for the service. But just before the appointed time Mr. Truman’s
green Chrysler pulled up, by that time driven by a single Secret Service agent.

Mr. Truman got out and slowly walked, with the help of a cane, to the grave side. With only President Truman in attendance, the service began and ended quickly. On the walk back to the car the minister looked at Truman and said, "Mr. President, why are you here? It's cold and bitter. You shouldn't be out!" Harry Truman looked at him through his very thick glasses and said, "Pastor, I never forget a friend."

Do you have a friend you never forget? A friend who never forgets you? Is there someone you need to remember?

We can all be comforted that we have one friend who never forgets us, who receives all the words we pour out to him, sifts the wheat and the chaff, keeps what is best in us and gently blows the rest away.

I invite you to be that sort of faithful friend to another. Be the one who walks into the room when the rest of the world is walking out, who will be a friend in deed when somebody else is in need. A confidant who can keep secrets and hold a trust even when tempted by chocolate, a person who will pray for the other and maybe even pray with them, that rare individual who thinks the best and criticizes the least, and so, by your companionship and care, will point the way to the friend of us all without ever speaking his name.