

“Friends”
Pastor John Bronson

John 15:12-17

January 13, 2013

Order of Worship for January 13th, title, “Friends”, text, John 15:12-17

Opening song:
Invocation: Micah 6:6-8

Welcome and Announcements
Ministry Moment

Worship Theme: Giving thanks for the gift of joy

Sunday Evening in the Word
5:00 pm – 7:30 pm in the Library
Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 6:1-4
“Disciplines of a holy Heart – Giving” (continued)

Opening Song:
“How Great is Our God” Overhead

Invocation: Micah 6:6-8

Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: The Hope Center

Preparing the Heart in Song:
“Lord, I Lift Your Name on High” Song # 107
“Since Jesus Came into My Heart” Song # 503

Offering and Offertory: “Amazing Grace”
by James Kinnamont and Lukas Valadez

Message: “Friends” John 15:12-17
Pastor John Bronson

Closing Song:
“Give Thanks” Song # 170

Parting Word of Grace

Sunday Evening in the Word:
5:30-7 pm in the Library: Sermon on the Mount,
Matthew 6:1-4, “Disciplines of a Holy Heart: Giving”

“The Prayer Closet”

December 30, 2012

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

National and District Evangelical Free Church Offices: the Lord will give them wisdom as they provide services and counsel to local churches during these days of financial leanness and governmental and social hostility; the Spirit will encourage them in hope and faithfulness

President Obama: the Lord will establish His sovereignty over the president’s mind and heart; the Spirit will draw his wife and daughters to a living faith in Jesus; the Father will protect them from all evil

Officers and Ministry Leaders for 2013: the Spirit will stir up in each one a more fervent and disciplined love for the Lord and for the church in which they serve; the Lord will give them wisdom for balancing home life, service in the church and work responsibilities; each one will by God’s grace be prayerful and open to the Spirit’s leading for ministry in the new year

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Aaron Bowen, Butte County Fire Volunteer (son of Randy and Ruth): for safety to, from and during calls he responds to.

Young Adult of the Week: Molly Finn at Shasta Jr. College (daughter of Sean & Penny): for the Lord’s clear direction in what University to transfer to.

Please pray for our homebound family members: Harley & Hilda Chapman , Carol Koehler, Gary & Ruth Lentz, Fred & Jean Pauly

(please call the office to request updates to this list)

The title for today’s message is “Friends”. The text is John 15:12-17. In conversation with [a gentleman in the hospital] last night one of the things that became very clear is that under his circumstances, in which he is forced to heavy breathing with a rattle, he finds it hard to be joyful. But joy is an essential aspect of the Christian’s walk. That comes out in John 15:12-17. Notice the emphasis in this opening statement on joy. Jesus says, *“These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.”* That is His opening statement. He says, “I want you to receive my joy, and I want you within yourself to experience a fullness of joy.” That is a kind of measurement criteria for us, a quality check on our walk of faith. We should ask questions of ourselves and ask questions of God saying, “If my life is joyless, why is that the case? What compromises my grasping and receiving and experiencing the joy which You intend would be mine as Your child?” So that is how we begin and now we should follow on as Jesus goes on to say,

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if...”

“You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”

This is a passage well worth noting and spending some time reflecting upon it. What do you think it was like for the eleven remaining disciples to hear Jesus say, “These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full”? At this point what I want us to do is to walk back into the Upper Room and recall for ourselves what is the existential situation in which these guys hear these words? What are they coping with when Jesus says, “By the way, the reason I have told you all this is so that My joy will be in you and your joy will be full”? What is it that they have to put together in order to understand what Jesus is doing to them?

Jesus has said to them, “I am going where you can’t go.” He has said, “I am going to the Father and I am going to send you the Spirit, and He will not leave you as orphans.” “I am going where you can’t go, but don’t worry, I will still be alive and because I am alive you are going to be alive.” He has twice told them, “Don’t be troubled; don’t be afraid.” How would that go?

I have a certain gift for doing creative things. One of them was that once I had all my family in my Aerostar minivan and I had a trailer behind it and we were going to camping in the mountains. We had come to the crest of an exceedingly steep grade in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We were on our way south eventually to go to Yosemite. As we began to go down this grade, you could see the bottom from the top. If you know anything about grades, when you can see the bottom from the top, well, it means you can see the bottom from the top is what it means! We got a little ways and all of a sudden I began to smell something: my brakes. I thought, “Uh oh!” And I thought to myself, “It would be best if I did not say to my wife who was sitting next to me [half asleep] and say to her, “Don’t be troubled by what you smell! Don’t think about; it’s not a problem! Pray, don’t think about it!” What happens to us when someone we love and respect says, “Now don’t be troubled.” I am sure they were troubled. I am sure that they felt that on this already dark night there was a darkness beginning to press in upon them. They don’t know exactly what it is, but they can feel that it is approaching.

Into this sense of gloom Jesus says, “Joy!”

Later on the Apostle Paul will actually give much the same sort of description or definition or emphasis in the Christian life. In Philippians 4:4-7 are verses I say often to myself: *“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say, rejoice!”* He goes on then to say, *“Let your forbearing (your reasonableness) be known to everyone. Do not be anxious for anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

Joy: joy is a constant theme in the New Testament. I think that we rightly, therefore, can conclude that it is the will of God that we be joyful. Indeed, I think we should understand that this is an essential aspect of the witness that we bear, that as you and I walk along with our neighbor through the context of life, through the circumstances of life, through all of the ups and downs and ins and outs and concerns and pressures that come in upon us, that it is our joyfulness, it is our inner peace that bears a witness that we have given to us something they would want – joy.

Often “joy” is contrasted with “happy”. Happiness is understood, based on the cognate or word like it “happenance”. Happiness is built upon the circumstances of life, and too often we let the circumstances of life determine whether or not we are glad in our hearts and thankful before God. That is the challenge, right, that is the challenge: we go through a variety of circumstances and do we remain fixed in the joy of the Lord or do those circumstances push us or blow us or pull us or knock us one way or another? That is much of the challenge [to faith] that we face in living. I think all of us understand that the Word of God is devoted to helping us understand the distinction between that which is and that which is not true joy.

How do we get ourselves so we are drawing our inner strength from that which is truly joyful rather than that which will betray us in a moment and leave us gasping?

Looking again at that statement by Jesus we should not miss the double focus of His statement: My joy and yours. His goal is to impart His joy and it is also to bring us the fullness of our joy. What we have here are at least two [questions]: we have to answer the question, “What is Jesus’ joy?” You want to know what that is in order to rightly focus on it. The second is, “What is our joy working in tandem with that?” That is the third question: how do these relate to each other? We have some information given to us in this passage that we are looking at today.

Long before either Jesus or Paul spoke of joy in the New Testament, in the Old Testament we hear from a great hero amongst the exiled and returned Jews, Nehemiah made this statement, *“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”* That is a piece of information that we might want to fix on. There is a relationship between strength and joy. As we consider how well we meet the various challenges that life brings to us, if we take this statement from Nehemiah in practical terms we would say, “You know, as I anticipate this trial, as I am experiencing this rising intensity of adversity, as I am feeling a kind of a cold wind, not a powerful wind but a steady draft of cold air and it is beginning to drain energy out of me, I might say to myself, “Oh, a corrective, a way to arm myself against the negative influences that are beginning to alter my picture of things, is [that] I need to draw again on the joy of the Lord.” What is this joy? Most of us know this. How many of you have experienced this, that you have a major exam, and you are terrified because you can’t remember anything? You decide that it is a hopeless case. What happens when you go in and you take that exam? Almost always it is a hopeless case. Your mind doesn’t function. You spend all your time telling yourself, “This is a hopeless case! I am dumb. I can’t remember anything! This is a disaster!” But what happens when you have joy? You pray to the Lord and you say, “Help me to remember what I need to know.” And by His grace it is like a sudden impulse and you think, “You know, I bet I can do this!” As the spirit is lifted, remarkable energies begin to flow and you can do far better than you ever thought you would.

The same thing is true if you are going to meet up with a very difficult situation, perhaps a person. You spend all your time focusing on what a miserable, awful person this is, and what a terrible relationship you have gotten into and all the multiplied difficulties [that] you have, have now redefined what you had thought was going to be a good working relationship and now is just a tangled mess. You would be better off going home than going on into the meeting. But if you say to yourself, “No, no, no, let me call on the Lord, “God give me Your perspective on this person and this situation. What is Your redemptive purpose here?” You can begin to draw on the Lord’s strength and begin to cope with the difficulties that you are confronted with. Joy.

In the book of Hebrews the author reminds us of how Jesus looked at the great difficulty that was His portion. This is Hebrews 12:1-2, *“Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* In that sentence, in that statement, what was Jesus’ joy? Clearly we are being told here that as Jesus contemplated what would be an almost impossible task, and overwhelming horrible episode in His life where He will be shut off from the love of the Father and shut under the wrath of a judging God against our sin which He had taken to Himself, how did Jesus find joy? He looked through the event to the ultimate reward. He drew strength from where He was going in order to endure what He had to go through. How important is it for us to meditate upon, reflect upon, think about and begin to build our inner strength not on today’s circumstances but on God’s eternal disposition of grace and goodness to us?

What was the joy which Jesus anticipated? The Gospels give us part of the answer. In Luke 24:26 records Jesus saying to the two men on the road to Emmaus – this is after His crucifixion and before they had learned of His resurrection – Jesus says to those men, *“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?”* Suffering now, entering into glory is My anticipation. Before His crucifixion Jesus said virtually the same thing just before withdrawing with His disciples into the Upper Room where He gave the discourses which we are studying. In John 12:23 Jesus said, *“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* What was that hour? That hour was His betrayal, His arrest, the mock trials, His crucifixion and then the resurrection and the ascension to be with the Father.

It is however to the prophet Isaiah that we need to turn in order to hear the clearest statement of the joy that Jesus knew would be His. Jesus knew, of course, that the whole of His divine glory would be regained after His great sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, the glory that He had set aside for the sake of the incarnation. In Philippians 2:5-8 we are told that we are to have the same mindset that Jesus had. What was it that Jesus demonstrated; what was His mindset? What Paul says, *“You know, Jesus was in a place of immense privilege, beyond the reach or touch of any trouble. But for love’s sake He set aside His privileges; for love’s sake He rendered Himself vulnerable; for love’s sake He let Himself come down not just into a human situation, but into a human situation of difficulty and loss: he is a servant in poverty. Then He allows Himself to be crucified.”* This is what Paul says here: we should have the same attitude. How contrary that is to the way we live our lives. What we live our lives doing is accumulating resources in order to build walls of security and protection against adversity. But what Paul says is that if we would be like Jesus, we would recognize that the path to glory is through self-sacrifice. That is exactly what we learn about in Isaiah 53:11. The prophet inspired by the Holy Spirit makes this statement: *“Out of the anguish of his soul, [referring to the messiah] he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous One, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”* Jesus’ great joy is in the salvation of the fallen sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. Who are those people? They are you! That is who they are. The fallen sons and daughters of Adam and Eve are the people I am looking at right now.

Out of the anguish of the cross Jesus looks through the haze of pain and the blackness of judgment and He sees you redeemed. And He says, *“Yes!”* Jesus recovers us from the judgment of death and then He presents us to the Father. We don’t always notice that. You might want to look at I Corinthians 15:22-24. This is what it says, *“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order. Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when [Jesus] delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.”* Earlier on in this series in John I pointed out what I think is clear from the Word of God, that the heart of the gospel is the Son’s love for the Father, and the Father’s love for the Son. What Jesus has done at the Father’s command is He has come and gathered up the souls of those who have placed their faith in Him. He gathers them up as the people of God and now, we are told, He comes to the Father and He says, *“Here they are, they are all here, every one of them, they are for You.”*

Joy. That is His joy; that is His gladness. I am sure of course that the Son of God and Jesus the Son of Man took joy in many things. Indeed I am persuaded that He is altogether joyful. What we are being told here is that incarnate Son of God took joy in the great work of saving souls. Paul expands on this: if you were to turn to Ephesians 2:4-7 this is what he says, *“God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places [in Christ Jesus] so that – now here is what you want to grab onto – so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”* What is the future that you and I anticipate? Some people have painted the absurd picture of little cherubs floating about in heaven strumming their harps. Well, I do not know what our future is in heaven, but this I do know because I was just told: you and I cannot imagine what it is that God has intended for us because His intention is to display to us, give to us, devote to us, lavish in us His kindness. That is His joy. God delights to do good. He delights to do good!

When Jesus says His purpose is for His joy to be in us, He is referring especially to the joy which comes from blessing others, not just saving us from our sins; that is why I have mentioned this broader reach of what salvation is about. Salvation is not just about saving you and me from judgment. It is about that, but that is like saying the whole point of having children is done when they are born. After that... What is the point? God’s delight, His great joy, His excitement is not just in the birth; it is in the up-bringing and the perfecting and the magnificence into each one of these children which He has called to be His own will be grown. What creatures will we be in the end of the process? You and I have absolutely no idea. This I do know: as between angels and the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve which stands higher in the hierarchy of God’s preference? We do! That is why Paul says, “Don’t you know y’all will judge angels?” Presently if an angel walked into this room openly, you and I would hit the floor. We would be both overwhelmed and terrified. But in that day it will not be so.

Hebrews 12:23 makes reference to heaven as being the place where righteous men are made perfect or complete. But perhaps the verse that speaks most directly is I Corinthians 2:9. I have already paraphrased this, *“What no eye has seen nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”* I must admit I am aware of these things: the joy of the Lord, His great delight in loving His creatures far out and beyond merely recovering us and the world from its present ruin. Some people will go great lengths and expend time and energy and they will feel an inner impulse, a demand, a necessity: “I want to be sure that I see all the beautiful things on the earth before I die.” My response is: “OK.” I love going to the mountains. I love hiking in the wilderness. One of the reasons Nini and I stay here is because...if you have been to our house you know that we have this incredible view of the valley and we watch the sunsets spread their beauty over the [Sutter] Buttes and the wide flat and over the west hills! [But this is] nothing compared to what will be. So I wonder at peoples values sometimes when they are desperate that they be certain that they get to the Himalayas! Those will be mole hills compared to what God has for us and it makes me wonder whether or not we really believe there is a future.

There is something more here, and more immediate which Jesus goes on immediately to speak of with His men. Notice that Jesus’ great promise of joy comes in the midst of a series of statements about commandments, obedience and love. Jesus’s words are woven into a kind of tapestry. You will see this in John 15:10-14, *“If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”* The words that we looked at briefly from Ephesians make reference to eternity future. The words that we are looking at now refer to the present. You and I are invited and enabled to be friends with God.

Obviously that raises a question of sorts. What does it mean to be friends with God? Well, I think there are two things that are immediately necessarily the case. The first is that if we are the friends of God we will enjoy His protection. He has said that over and over. You cannot read any portion of the Gospels and the Letters and over and over he says “I will take care of you. I will provide for you. I will not leave you alone, you will not be deserted. I will not abandon you. We get the picture; we have a hard time believing it, but we get the picture.

But there is something else. He enjoys our company. We enjoy His protective care; He enjoys our company. Why do I say that? In I John 4:19 we have this wonderful statement, which many have memorized. *“We love because He first loved us.”* But I am not sure that we really think through what that means, not in practical terms. What will almost without exception, and understandably so, [come to mind is something like], “God loves me. He sent His Son to die for my sins.” OK; and? “Well, He sent His Son to die for my sin.” Yes. Let me rephrase it. I will answer the question. God loves you. He sent His Son to become your friend. We are saved to be friends with Jesus.

I believe that by recasting that statement it opens, perhaps, a wider perspective on what is available to us in our walk of faith. For a moment consider that we are to love one another. We are to love Jesus. We are to love God the Father. That is what this is about. We are to love. But the love that we are to have, the love that we are to experience, the love that we are to exercise is not just the love of adoration and praise; it is the love of friendship. That is why we are friends. It is needful for us to be clear what the love friendship is like, what describes it and therefore what fulfills its potential. Remember that what we are talking about here are relationships which become the substance of the joy of the Lord in us. That is the intention here, that is why Jesus has said, “I want my joy to be in you, I want your joy to be full. By the way, I died to become your friend. Friends share the joy of life!” So, what does it mean to be a friend? I went to the dictionary. What is a friend? A friend is defined in the dictionary as a person whom one knows well and is fond of; intimate associate; close acquaintance; a person who is on your side in the struggle; an ally.

This is very bad advice, but you could stop listening to me right now and think about what that says. Here is the question that arises out of that definition. Ask this question: am I a friend of Jesus? Does this describe the relationship of a friendship which is true of me? The other question is: if I had this kind of relationship with Jesus, would His joy more readily pour into my life and would I begin to experience a greater joy in living? Friends: Jesus said we are friends. He wants to be friends. We love as friends and this love proves itself as obedience to the Lord’s commands.

Predictably when I say that, it will tend to set up some difficulties within us. We are influenced, I believe, by the culturally held notion that love and obedience are in tension if not in contradiction. Culturally we prefer the idea that love never commands or demands but only suggest and asks. Even more we are held by the idea that if something is done by another’s command, it is no longer a free act. It has been commanded and we are under constraint. Thinking that way, thinking that there is a contradiction between what is done as love and what is done under command, that mindset reflects the deeply arrogant and rebellious heart of the natural man. The natural man says this: “Nobody is going to tell me what to do. So if you come to me; if my beloved wife comes to me and says, ‘Buddy here it is: this is the way it is going to be. You are going to make the bed. You are going to do the laundry; you are going to fix breakfast.’” What is the natural response? The natural response on my part would be to say, “Oh yeah?” That is the natural response. What is the godly response? “I love you so much that I will do whatever you ask.”

In His comments to His men in John 15, Jesus distinguishes between the obedience of a friend and that of a servant. A servant does what he or she is told without necessarily knowing why. The friend, Jesus says, is fully informed. This is what Jesus says, *“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”*

Obedience to the commands of the Lord does not flow from fear of swift and harsh reprisal, nor from fear of mockery or rejection or fear of the withdrawal of love and affection. All of these are ways in which the world seeks to force obedience or submissions to its commands and demands. But God does not treat us that way. God desires obedience freely given from a heart of thankfulness and trust. That is what He wants. That is why He treats us as friends. Friends are essentially equals in their relationship as friends.

Just briefly we might think of the relationship between Abraham and God. Abraham was called the friend of God. Do we have any evidence? We do. Remember the episode where God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? What happened in that episode? God says, “Maybe I will let Abraham know what I am up to. Hey Abraham, I am going to go down there and check it out, and if it is a bad place: zappo!” God did not need to tell Abraham, but He wanted a conversation to happen. He wanted Abraham to have his compassions for Lot awakened, stirred up, so that Abraham, knowing he is talking with God, would say, “Wait a minute: can we come to a common understanding as to what is going to happen?” You and I both know of the negotiations that then occurred. Now listen to two passages of scripture. Jesus says this to His friends the disciples: *“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”* Now this is God speaking to Abraham: *“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord ...”* Shall I not tell Abraham? Well of course I will tell Abraham; he is my friend.

No creature will ever be equal to the Creator, the notion is absurd. But God incarnate as Jesus, the Son of Man, has as far as possible made Himself equal to us. The incarnation of Jesus brings to us the fullest expression of what we see God established with Abraham. Later on God will say through his servant [Amos], *“For the Lord does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets.”* We are God’s friends.

As we come to the conclusion there are three elements in our relationship with God. These are the foundation if not the whole substance of our joy. Jesus has given to us the whole counsel of God’s wisdom for our good, for our salvation. Jesus has laid down His life so that we will be saved: forgiveness of guilt, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. And then Jesus commands that we are to love one another. How are we to love one another? [We are to love one another] the way He loved the disciples. That is how we are to love one another. It is clear that in Jesus’ physical absence we are to love Him by loving one another. We are to do so as friends. Here is a description of the church: the fellowship of the Body of Christ is to be that of friendship in the bonds of affection in mutual interests and appreciation and respect. Are we friends? Did you hear? Are we friends? It is not the intention of God that y’all just be friends with Jesus. It is the intention of God that we will be friends. For it is in loving one another that we love God.

Let us pray: our gracious Father in heaven, thank You for the remarkable word that You have given to us. It is indeed the word of life. Sometimes it is painful, for it must put to death what remains of the flesh within us. But then Father it brings to us the glorious fruit of the joy of the Lord. We give You thanks. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. In response to last week’s message, how have you organized your life for Bible study and prayer?

2. How well do the things that interest and excite you fit with what you understand to be the character and purposes of God in general and especially in His call in your life?

3. What do you do for others that brings you satisfaction and even joy?

4. In what circumstances or when others are faced with what sort of difficulties are you prompted to want to act on their behalf?

5. What are the ways or means by which obedience to commands or meeting the expectations of others, especially superiors, is enforced as a general rule?

6. Does the idea of obeying the commands of a friend seem contradictory to you? Do you have any friends who are in a position to make demands of you or to command you?

7. Do you tend to think of the Lord as a friend? Would you say that your parents or grand-parents are friends? Should husbands and wives be friends?

8. Who are your friends in the Body of Christ generally and this church specifically? What is the danger of having real friends who are not in the Body of Christ?

9. Is it your experience that your joy is increased through friendship?