

Be Loved Faith Study

Session 2: Be Friend, Be Light



This session is packed – Take it with you after your group and continue to reflect.

As God's beloved children, God calls us to reach out and be a source of love and light to the people in our lives. God's hope is that we extend a sense of welcome and care to friends. And, beyond this, God's desire is for us to create a sense of welcome for individuals we see for the first time or only in brief, fleeting moments. God's gift and hope is for holy friendships.

Opening Questions (select 1 or 2 questions)

- Do you have any friendships formed by unlikely or surprising circumstances? If so, share how you became friends.
- How have you been maintaining friendships and a sense of community during the pandemic?
- What qualities have you found valuable or inspiring in your friends?
- How did you meet one of your closest friends? How has the friendship developed or changed over time?

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, we are grateful for the way you gather us together as friends. Help us to see everyone in our lives as your beloved children. We thank you for the example of friendship that you have given us in the story of Ruth and Naomi. We ask for your presence with us as we are here together. Help us to nurture and care for others so that our friendships may grow strong and deep in you. Amen.

What Does the Bible Say?

Ruth is the daughter-in-law of the widow Naomi. Naomi, Ruth and another daughter-in-law have been living in Moab. When both of her sons die, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, the land of her birth. She tells her Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their families in Moab. Ruth does not honor Naomi's request and leaves her homeland to live in Bethlehem with Naomi. Ruth's song has become a testimony to faithful relationships and Ruth's loyalty remains a beautiful model for friendship.

Ruth 1:15-19b

So [Naomi] said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.



Think About...

You have a chance to view and talk about the Illumination of this text from *The Saint John's Bible* (see image above)¹. The actual image and printed copies are available in the Chapel. Or view a larger image, on the *Be Loved* webpage under session 2.

Questions on the Illumination

- What do you notice or what speaks to you from the illumination today?
- What aspects of friendship are depicted in this illumination?
- What colors and shapes stand out to you in the image? What could be the significance of them based on the story?
- Which figure do you think is Ruth, and which is Naomi in the illumination? What makes you think that?
- Why would the artist not identify which woman is Naomi and which is Ruth? What might that say about their friendship?

Questions on the Text

- What does this story tell us about friendship?
- What might have motivated Ruth to stay with and support Naomi? How is each person blessed by this arrangement?
- Think about the reaction of Naomi when Ruth refuses to return to her homeland. What do you think Naomi was thinking and feeling?
- What does God seem to ask of us, as individuals, so that we might be open to the blessings of deep friendship?
- When have you been in a situation where you didn't fit in and, nevertheless, took a big risk? How was God present?

What Do Others Say?

Who is the writer? Look at the end of the reflection to find out before you begin.

Dick Ericson was a renaissance man, brilliant and accomplished in his work for social justice in the Twin Cities and across the nation. When he died suddenly, he left a wife and 9-year-old son. The news was jarring for Al and me, as our son, Matt, was in the

fourth grade with their son, Matthew. Dick and Al had become friends through their “Dad’s small group” at church, joking with one another that they were the “old dads”!

A short time after the funeral, we asked Becky and Matt to come over to our home, hoping to give her some support and him a play date. As the boys scampered off to romp in the backyard on a late summer day, Becky and Al sat in a couple of lawn chairs. I left them, knowing it wouldn’t be long before they would connect in the shared experience of the death of their beloved spouses. You see, my husband’s first wife died fifteen years before, leaving him with a seven-year-old son.

Becky and Al sat and talked for two hours. Before Becky and Matt left, I asked her if she would consider joining a “Mom’s small group” I co-led at church. Although Becky and I were mere acquaintances at the time, she seemed touched by the invitation.

How do friendships begin? It’s kind of fun to think about. The circumstances are many and varied, no doubt. But I’d say the good ones develop organically, or naturally. And yet, effort and intention are helpful catalysts. In some longstanding friendships, we may not have thought much about or even remember how it began!

The Old Testament story of the widow Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, is a connection born out of loss. When Naomi’s husband and her two sons die, she decides to return to Bethlehem, telling her daughters-in-law to also return to their respective homes. (A widow in these times was especially vulnerable.) One daughter-in-law takes Naomi’s advice to return to her home, but the other, Ruth, pledges her loyalty and love to Naomi.

So [Naomi] said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said,

*“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”*

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. –Ruth 1:15-19a (NRSV)

The Japanese word “kenzoku” describes friendship as a family-like deep bond or connection. Even though Ruth had no blood relationship with Naomi, she saw her bond with her mother-in-law as a familial one. Out of their mutual losses, they forged a deep relationship because of circumstance, and out of an intention that developed somewhere along the way.

In a Christian community, we are friends in Christ, because we are friends *with* Christ. Jesus calls us his friends in John’s gospel as he commands us to love one another the way he has loved us.

I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I’ve named you friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from the Father. – John 15: 11-15 (MSG)

We are connected to one another as the “body of Christ” on earth. We cannot be Christians alone. It’s not a “me and God” kind of proposition. As followers of Christ, we belong to one another in a community, a team, a family—and it occurs one relationship at a time. These friendships happen and deepen in amazing ways through our interactions with one another, both large and small. In the same way God welcomes us into God’s family, we are called to welcome one another into friendship through acts of hospitality.

“Like the sacramental use of water and bread and wine, friendship takes what’s common in human experience and turns it into something holy.”² - Eugene Peterson

Have you experienced a relationship with someone at the heart level, where honesty and support are unconditional? A holy friendship, perhaps? L. Gregory Jones defines “holy friendship” as a relationship with another who “affirms the gifts we are afraid to claim, challenges the sins we have come to love, and helps us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream.”³

A loyal friendship formed through experiences shared over time can be one of life’s great blessings. Martin Luther believed it was sacramental. In Luther’s doctrine, he wrote that this type of relationship is yet another way God comes to us freely in His grace and goodness. Luther believed God meets us in Scripture, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the power of the keys (forgiveness of sins), AND through something he called “the mutual conversation and consolation of the souls.” He cited Matthew 18:20. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Smalcald Articles of 1537).

The mutual conversation and consolation of the souls is indeed a profound heart level connection that binds us together as Christ's own friends. When you share the highs and lows with another who really "gets you," it can make your heart soar.

You may be interested to know that Becky said "yes" to my invitation (that many years ago) to join our mom's small group. In fact, a couple years later when I stepped down from leading the group, Becky stepped up and co-led this group for another 10 years! I can attest that in addition to sharing our faith, there was a great deal of mutual conversation and consolation AND laughter AND coffee in an expanding circle of friends.

This is the experience I received as a gift from Becky in a friendship that began on that summer day more than 15 years ago and has deepened into something very special. Even though she has moved to another state, our love and appreciation for one another is still growing! Thanks be to God.

--Pastor Janet Karvonen Montgomery

Think About (select one or more questions)

- Jesus tells us "I've named you friends..." How does it feel to be called a friend of Jesus? Does it change how we extend friendship to others? How does this relate to being a beloved child of God – the theme from session one?
- Do you have holy friends who support you in the ways mentioned in the reflection? Write the names of some of your holy friends.
- Tell about a time when you walked with a friend through a difficult stretch. What did you gain by walking together? Did you sense God's presence in any way?
- How would you explain the "mutual conversation and consolation of the souls" to someone? For you, what is meaningful about this?
- The number of people experiencing loneliness has jumped dramatically since the start of the pandemic. How do we reach out and extend friendship to acquaintances or those who we don't know very well? What are some things to take from the text or the reflection into those relationships?
- What obstacles or circumstances make it difficult for us to connect deeply with friends? What are some ways around those obstacles?
- How do we extend friendship to those with whom we disagree on controversial topics? Is it necessary to agree to be able to share a "holy friendship"?
- What are some ways to open yourself up to friendships that cross barriers like race, age, socio-economic status and religion? What are the blessings of friendships with others who are in different life-stages or circumstances?
- What are some practical ways you've found to care for others in need? How have others cared for you when you were in a difficult time?

Connecting Faith with Daily Life (for individual reflection & action)

- Take time to write a note or call a friend you haven't talked with in a while to remind them what you appreciate most about them and how they are a blessing in your life.
- Visit the Incarnation Chapel to view the full-size illumination of Ruth and Naomi in the *Historical Books* volume of *The Saint John's Bible* (if not on display, check the drawers beneath the glass case for this volume). What particularly strikes you about this image? How does the image add to your understanding of friendship?
- Share stories of your childhood friends with your children, grandchildren, or current friends or ask others about their childhood friends. This may lead to an opportunity to talk about the importance and the benefits of friendship.

Closing Prayer from Psalm 46

One: As we leave this time together, let's quiet ourselves as we dwell in God's presence. In the silence, give thanks for your relationships with others.

Silence

One: Let's read Psalm 46 responsively.

One: Be still and know that I am God.

All: Be still and know that I am God. *Silence*

One: Be still and know.

All: Be still and know. *Silence*

One: Be still.

All: Be still. *Silence*

One: Be.

All: Be. Amen.

¹Ruth and Naomi Illumination, Suzanne Moore, Copyright 2010, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

²Peterson, Eugene H. *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. HarperOne, 1998.

³Jones, L. Gregory. "Discovering Hope through Holy Friendships." *Faith and Leadership*, 18 June 2012, <https://faithandleadership.com/l-gregory-jones-discovering-hope-through-holy-friendships>

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