



Week 1 Preaching Resources: Loving Friends

Scripture Passage: John 21:3-4, 10-17

Focus Statement: The love of friends carries us through good times and times of trouble. Jesus models for us true friendship even through times of disappointment and hurt.

ME: Think about a friendship that has been transformative for you. (Try to avoid a romantic relationship.) If you are comfortable doing so, tell a story of a time when a friend has shown you forgiveness.

WE: We all make mistakes in our friendships. We've all failed friends. We've all had difficult friendships. We have all experienced the difficulty of forming and keeping friendships.

GOD: Just as God meets us where we are, we are called to meet people where they are. This is a powerful story of love, friendship and forgiveness. The Gospel of John records Peter denying being a follower or a friend of Jesus the night before his crucifixion. Now on the beach, maybe their first private conversation since that night, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me" (or "agape" in the Greek,) and two times Peter answers Lord, you know I love you deeply as a friend (or "philia" in the Greek). The third time Jesus asks Peter, and by this time he is hurt and likely embarrassed by his denial, "Peter do you really love me deeply as a friend?" and Peter responds, "Lord you know all things and you know now that I love you deeply as a friend."

You may want to explore what Jesus was trying to communicate when he repeats Peter's use of love when asking the third time, "Do you love me?" How does the type of love we offer friends, even Jesus, change the way we interact with them and how we might respond to their requests (i.e. "Feed more sheep.")

Consider how you could use this story to invite your congregations to think about their own stories of transformative friendships. We are often changed by people offering us deeper levels of love than at the time we are capable of giving, and we are transformed by their ability to offer us grace and love. Because of Jesus showing Peter forgiveness, he is able to live into the new commandment, to wash one another's feet in humble love, which had been given just prior to the foretelling of Peter's denial in John 13.

YOU: When have you experienced a time when you had to deal with your own failure in a relationship? Was that person gracious like Jesus or not? Has there been a friendship in your life that has seen you through different stages of life? How have long term friendships transformed your life?

WE: What are some practical things you could do to build friendships beyond your normal social circles? Who is someone at your job or in your neighborhood who may need a friend? How could you start building a friendship with that person? Is there someone who you need to ask forgiveness from? Or that you need to forgive? How might you reach out?



Week 2 Preaching Resources: Loving Community

Scripture Passage: John 6:1-13

Focus Statement: We witness to the love of God when we share our goods and gifts with the community.

ME: Think about a community, organization, or team that you have been a part of, other than the church. Tell a story about how being part of that community shaped your identity or sense of self in a positive way.

WE: One of the ways we find our sense of identity is by being part of groups. Ask the congregation what groups they are a part of and invite them to respond aloud.

GOD: The feeding of the 5000 is one of the signs in the gospel of John that witnesses to the identity of Jesus. Apart from the resurrection, it is the only miracle or sign that is found in all four gospels. The story is an example of the table fellowship that was at the center of Jesus' ministry. Jesus invites the crowd to break bread with him. While Jesus could have performed this sign by himself, he chooses to use the boy's willingness to share what he had as an example to others.

The disciples, though doubtful at first, witness the boy's generosity and the way Jesus transforms that generous, though small gift into something much greater. In asking the disciples to gather up the leftover bread, Jesus both emphasizes the miracle that has taken place and invites them to participate in the community of table fellowship. They become participants in Jesus' work of serving and feeding.

Through the generosity and the gifts of the community, the crowd is fed. We witness to the identity of Jesus by serving the community in mission. When we share our gifts, we strengthen and build community. We also claim our own identity as people who belong to Jesus' community. This is not a community characterized by insiders and outsiders but, first and foremost by what it has received, the grace of Jesus Christ, and secondarily by the way it witnesses to that grace by serving others. It is important for us to recognize that Jesus understood attending to basic physical needs as an essential piece of evangelism and a tangible sign of God's grace.

YOU: How is God calling you to use your resources and gifts to build and serve the greater community?

WE: In the communities you are a part of, including the church, how is God calling you to deepen conversation and broaden the circle by increasing conversation partners? Who might we have overlooked, thinking, like the disciples did of the little boy, that they did not have much contribute?



Week 3 Preaching Resources: Loving Family

Scripture Passage: Luke 10:38-42

Focus Statement: Jesus invites us to appreciate the better parts of life when they are offered.

ME: We are often pulled in so many directions. We are busy in our communities, with friends and sometimes when it comes to our families, we are too distracted to spend quality time together. Share a story about missing a chance to enjoy time with family.

WE: We have all had moments of being distracted by our busyness and preoccupations. Share a story about how even good things like church work can take us away from enjoying things we say we prioritize in life.

GOD: We can be distracted by obligations, expectations, and responsibilities and we can miss opportunities to enjoy relationships and simply be in the moment. We often especially miss out on opportunities to be with those closest to us because we take for granted that our loved ones will always be there. They simply form part of the background of our lives, or we put off spending quality time with them until “everything else is done.”

In Luke 10:38-42, Martha misses the opportunity to be with Jesus, but she also misses the opportunity to be with Mary and to enjoy what Jesus calls the “better part.” It is not that what Martha has chosen to do is wrong or bad. It is necessary work, and she is focused on being productive, to the point that she thinks Mary should be doing the same. (Note: It is often assumed that Martha is doing housework, but the text does not specify that. It is also possible that she was teaching, preaching, and serving). Like Martha, when we become distracted, we take for granted that our way is the only way and can miss opportunities to connect with loved ones.

Within our families we all have roles. In this scripture Martha’s role within her family is more activity-oriented; she actively serves in the home and/or community. Mary’s role is more contemplative, to have quiet time with Jesus. By becoming overly focused on her role, Martha has missed an opportunity to not only connect with Jesus, but also with her sister. The point of this story is not that we should be still and listen 100% of the time. Rather, when we are willing to think critically about our roles, we need not always get caught up in them. We can be intentional about when it is important to prioritize other things, particularly time with those closest to us.

YOU: This is an opportunity to look at what roles we have in our families and communities, as well as to recognize the roles of others. If we find ourselves distracted or dissatisfied, maybe this is a chance to change the ways we usually interact with family.

WE: Sometimes we have opportunities to share in service, but default to our usual roles. How might we as a church family explore how to better appreciate how others serve (be it through study and contemplation, hands-on mission, leading worship, taking care of the building, etc.). How can we join our gifts together to better serve Jesus? How might we experiment with doing something outside of our ordinary roles so we can experience Jesus more fully and in different ways? Lift up the different ways people with different gifts could work cooperatively to serve.



Week 4 Preaching Resources: Loving God

Scripture Passage: Mark 2:23-28

Focus Statement: To regularly set aside time to rest and worship demonstrates our love for God.

ME: Tell a story about when you took time in the midst of a busy schedule to rest. How did that help you prepare you for the work ahead? This might be a good time to share how little breaks can matter. You do not need a big vacation.

WE: As a society, we tend to overschedule. Share a story about how you have seen where people are finding good ways to rest and find restoration.

GOD:

By the time Jesus began teaching, Sabbath rest had become a very stringent, legalized practice. There were several hundred things a law-abiding Jew could not do on the Sabbath. Throughout the Bible, Jesus has various encounters with the Pharisees concerning the Sabbath.

Jesus did not see Sabbath as a restrictive, joyless practice; instead, it was a time to share with others, a time of healing, a time to extend love and grace. Consider ways Jesus invites people into Sabbath (for example: quietness, being apart, prayer, and fellowship). In his book, *Wrestling with Rest*, Nathan Stucky notes that Jesus only spends one Sabbath day alone – he spends the rest in various types of community. So being with others in fellowship, particularly centered around Jesus, is one way for people to find Sabbath rest and even healing (another of Jesus' favorite Sabbath activities).

Jesus also points to Sabbath as a holy time. Sabbath rest helps us create space to honor God, to set time apart to build a loving relationship with God. The gospels also indicate that Jesus worships on the Sabbath (e.g., Luke 4:16). At other times, he recharges by spending time in prayerful solitude (e.g., Matt 14:22-23). We can see that there are different ways to Sabbath at different times, and when we have different needs.

YOU: Each of us has the ability to take time apart with God. Making time for Sabbath is at least as important as scheduling other tasks. Ask the congregation to consider how they are going to spend some quality time with God and also rest? Give some examples.

WE: What does it mean to take a Sabbath? Ask the congregation how they might need to let some things go to make space and time to spend time with God. Consider practices that would help the congregation build their relationship with God, such as more times for community prayer or a congregational retreat.