



Under the authority of Christ, we are becoming a community of Jesus-followers for the transformation of the world.

“The Faith of Four Friends”

Theme: Connect with... the Real Social Network

Scripture: Mark 2:1-5

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon

[illegible]

Family/Community Activity for the week: In John 13:34, Jesus said, “Love one another.” Jesus showed his followers what he meant by those words. With his words and actions, Jesus listened, cared for, fed, taught, healed and served others. As a family, discuss the ways you speak and show love to one another and to those outside your family. Is each family member encouraged to serve others? How often do you take time to listen to others? Talk about ways you can share love with people who are lonely, hurting or sad. Consider spending time with people in a local nursing home or hospital. Do you have a neighbor who lives alone who would be blessed by your care? Pray and ask Jesus to help you love others as he did.

Meditation Moments for Monday, May 8 - Read Mark 2:1-12. This incident so awed Jesus' followers that the first three gospels all tell the story nearly word for word. The man in the story badly needed healing. By himself, however,

he wasn't going to be able to get near Jesus. With effort and ingenuity, his friends brought him into Jesus' presence. Jesus healed him inwardly even before he restored his ability to walk.

- Jesus saw the paralyzed man's deepest need differently than many (maybe even his "stretcher bearers") would have. Jesus told him, "Son, your sins are forgiven." In what ways can Christian friends be like Jesus' physical presence to heal and encourage one another? In what ways can Christian friends show God's forgiveness and grace?
- Have you ever been mentally, emotionally or physically paralyzed, and had people who cared about you carry you through the situation? Have you ever been part of carrying someone you cared about through a crisis? In either case, what did it take to "dig through the roof" to meet the other person's need?

Prayer: *Dear God, I admit I need healing but sometimes I ignore my need and think I can do it all on my own. Help me to lean on others and lean on you. Help me to see where I might be a stretcher-bearer for others as well. Amen.*

Tuesday, May 9 - Read Romans 12:9-21. Today's Scripture twice uses a term that sounds so ordinary we might miss the fact that it's a key New Testament idea: "one another." God did not call Christians to a solo journey through the hostile Roman world. They were a community, strengthened in their power to "overcome evil with good" by their steady, loving commitment to one another.

- How have other people treated you? What differences have you seen in the way non-Christians relate to each other and to you, and the way Christians do? Which group has come closer to living up to the ideals in today's reading? What wounds do you have from the past? How can God and God's people help to heal those wounds?
- "Hurt people hurt people" is sadly true. Jesus came to offer a new way of "being" with one another, which Paul summed up as "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." Think about Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Mohandas Gandhi—and Jesus. They "overcame evil with good." What is your experience of living this way?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you have called us to love one another, but sometimes I find that hard, mostly because I feel hurt and have not asked for healing. May I experience healing in my heart and soul so I might love others. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 10 - Read Colossians 3:12-17. Being a group or church "member" can feel like "paper work." My name goes on a list, I agree to certain things, I receive news and notices, stuff like that. Colossians didn't say we are "members of an organization," but "members of one body." The image suggests that Jesus connects us to each other organically, as a leg or arm is joined to our body.

- Today's verses are about what it means to be "holy." What kind of person does the word "holy" bring to your mind? How do "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" enrich your sense of what it means for you to be holy? In what ways is the close connection of Christians to each other vital for living truly holy lives?
- Christian music didn't start with TobyMac, Amy Grant, Fanny Crosby or even Charles Wesley and J. S. Bach! The first Christians shared "psalms [Israel's traditional music], hymns, and songs from the Spirit [probably newly written]." When has music drawn you closer to others who share your faith, and filled your heart with gratitude to God?

Prayer: *Lord God, you long to have your Holy Spirit come into my heart. You long for this not just for me, but so I might let down my guard and connect with others as part of your body. Give me the courage to do that. Amen.*

Thursday, May 11 - Read 1 John 4:7-12. Someone once wrote, "To live above with saints we love/Ah, that will be glory!/To live below/ with saints we know/Well, that's another story." Christian community doesn't just happen by magic. When John wrote, "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another," he spoke of a process in which the Holy Spirit grows in us the ability to love rather than to hurt.

- A common view of love is expressed in the line "Love is a feeling" (used in a Michael Jackson song titled, ironically, "Give in to Me"). But the Greek word *agape*, which John used to describe what God did for us in Jesus, wasn't about

warm, fuzzy feelings. When have you been upheld or comforted by God's gritty, determined kind of love (from God directly or through another person)?

- In contrast to "love is a feeling," Downhere's song, "A Better Way," says Jesus "gave everything/And 'I love you' could not be said a better way." When has loving called you beyond feelings, and helped you doggedly act in another person's best interests?

Prayer: *O God, you call to love a better way by saying "I love you" when we choose to love, even though we don't feel like it. I confess that many times I don't want to do that God! May be humble enough to choose love today. Amen.*

Friday, May 12 - Read John 13:31-35. We read yesterday that God's love is the motive and the power by which we love one another in the "social network" of Christian faith. God's love for us was not distant or abstract. It took human form in Jesus. With the Roman cross awaiting him on the next day, right after Judas left into the darkness to betray him, Jesus gave his followers this call to love one another.

- A non-religious friend you invite to join you in worship says, "I don't know. So many churches make so many claims. How do I know you guys are on the right track?" What do you say? What does it take to live into Jesus' answer to that question: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"?
- Imagine you were one of Jesus' followers. After three years of daily contact, he said he wouldn't be physically with you anymore. But he would send the Holy Spirit, and "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Could you accept the sincere (but at times faulty) love of other disciples as a sign of Jesus' love to you? Can you today?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me to be a witness to others by how I love those around me. You have called me to love others the way you love me, with no strings attached. I know that is impossible without you, so help me to carry you in my heart every moment of every day. Amen.*

Saturday, May 13 - Read Luke 22:19-32. As they listened to Jesus words about giving his body, and a new covenant in his blood, the disciples were still human. So "a dispute also arose among them as to which of them was ... greatest." Jesus repeated that "great" has a different meaning in his kingdom. Then he warned Peter that he would fall, but gave him hope and a crucial role in the community: "When you have returned, strengthen your brothers and sisters." (Common English Bible)

- Jesus didn't just give his followers a "rule sheet" and say, "Use these policies for a new sacrament I want you to keep." For what reasons do you believe he instead gathered them together for the first Lord's Supper? In what ways can our Communion times draw us together and bolster our belonging with one another as members of Christ's body? When has Jesus touched your heart at communion, making forgiveness real to you or convicting you of a way God can empower you to heal a broken relationship?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, the next time a gather with others for a meal, help to look at each person and give thanks. May I remember you at that meal, knowing you gave it all so I might remember your grace and forgiveness. Amen.*

Theme: Connect – with the Real Social Network

“The Faith of Four Friends”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

May 6-7, 2017 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Scripture: Mark 2: 1-5

1 When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was back home. 2 Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there was no more room, even outside the door. While he was preaching God’s word to them, 3 four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. 4 They couldn’t bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. 5 Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “My child, your sins are forgiven.”

VIDEO Sermon Intro

SLIDE “The Faith of Four Friends”

I would invite you to take out of your bulletin your Meditation Moments and your Message Notes. If you’re watching at home online you can download this resource right off the website. There are some blank lines below for you to take notes and I would love for you to write down anything you feel like God is speaking to you today during our time of worship.

Below that you will find Meditation Moments that can help you go deeper in today’s message throughout the next week. We hope you will find that to be a blessing.

Today we continue in a series of sermons we been doing about what it means to connect and we have looked at social media and

social connections as part of this series of sermons, recognizing that many people connect in this way in today's world. I found myself this past week wondering how this social media phenomenon got started and as I did a bit of research I discovered that it began back in the late 1990s with a website called **"6° of Separation."**

GRAPHIC Six Degrees 1998

The website was based on the idea that all living things and everything else in the world are six or fewer steps away from each other so that a chain of "a friend of a friend" statements can be made to connect any two people in a maximum of six steps. It was originally set out by Frigyes Karinthy in 1929 and popularized in an eponymous 1990 play written by John Guare and in 1993 made into a film starring Wil Smith.

GRAPHIC Six Degrees 1997

SixDegrees.com was an early social-networking website that existed from 1997 to 2001. It allowed users to list friends, family members and acquaintances, send messages and post bulletin board items to people in their first, second, and third degrees, and see their connection to any other user on the site. At its height, it had 3,500,000 fully registered members. However, it was closed in 2000. Do you know which website took its place? Facebook, of course!

In 2001, a Facebook platform application named "Six Degrees" was developed by Karl Bunyan, which calculates the degrees of separation between different people. It had over 5.8 million users, as seen from the group's page. The average separation for all users of the application is 5.73 degrees, whereas the maximum degree of separation is 12. Facebook reported that the distance had decreased to 3.57 in February 2016, when it had 1.6 billion users (about 22% of world population).

When I was younger, we talked about this not in terms of a website but in terms of an actor. Which actor was it? It was Kevin Bacon. I have no idea why in the world we all became fascinated with

connecting ourselves to Kevin Bacon, but there was a time when everyone was into that. It was a topic of conversation around the dinner table. Did any of you ever have one of those conversations about Kevin Bacon?

The game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" was invented as a play on the concept: the goal is to link any **actor** to Kevin Bacon through no more than six connections, where two actors are connected if they have appeared in a movie or commercial together. It was created by three students at Albright College in Pennsylvania, who came up with the concept while watching Footloose. On September 13, 2012, Google made it possible to search for any given actor's 'Bacon Number' through their search engine.

GRAPHIC Kevin Bacon Chart

The idea of all of this was to show just how small the world really is and how connected we really are. Their hope was that people would connect and realize the power in those connections. Social networking sites didn't take off until 1999, after the movie ***"You Got Mail"*** came to theaters. Do you all remember that movie?

Now I can tell you're actually scared because we've talked about Kevin Bacon, but now we will talk about this movie with Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks who were on the Kevin Bacon chart above. Some of you think I'm speaking in tongues, don't you? This movie was important because it was the first time it showed the power of connection in a mass media outlet through social media relationships and online networking sites. This movie allowed us to imagine how our online network might shape our real-life world. We learned and saw that these online connections could change our lives off-line. Let's check out this clip and see if you can't sense the emotion they are sharing as they connect virtually.

VIDEO You've Got Mail

Could you sense the emotion in their interaction? Beginning early

in the 2000's, social media begins to take off and the hope is that people could discover community, because that is a basic human need. From the beginning of time, we were created to be relational. In the second chapter of Genesis, we read that it's not good for us to be alone as humans and so God created a "companion and helper" for that first human. This is meant to go beyond the idea of marriage, but gets to the core of what it means to be human. At our root, we are social beings who were made to be in community. Augustine, who is an ancient church father, says this in his book, The City of God.

SLIDE "Our desire to be in relationship is ultimately what makes us human."

We are meant to live in a world where there are social networks, and if ever there was a time where you needed evidence that we were treated to relate and connect, and that proved we desire to be one with others, it would be now. We are living in a time where we cannot escape social networks. We can't get away from this constant connection, because we are always connected or hearing about connections and our phones, or tablets or phablets are always on!

I looked up this week, and every second there are 1 million tweets, more than 700,000 items shared on Facebook, 2 million Google search queries, 50 hours of YouTube videos uploaded, 50,000 apps downloaded from the app stores, 600 websites created, \$300,000 spent online, and 55% of consumers share their purchases on social media sites. 4 billion of the 6.8 billion people on the planet have a cell phone for mobile connection. And in a worldwide survey conducted the first three months of this year where people were asked what was most essential in life, the top three were **keys, money and a mobile phone**.

Whether we like it or not, digital and social media are changing the way we do relationships in the world. One in three US marriages begin with online dating. Over 50% of the world's population is under the age of 30 and 96% of that generation is connected to a social

network. More people use Facebook than the most populated nation on the planet. There is real power, with the ability to change the world as we have seen revolutions begin with social media campaigns in certain countries. We saw our last presidential election heavily affected by twitter and the online world. We see large numbers of people respond to national and world tragedies by giving online and coordinating emergency efforts. There is power in coordinating people and resources for these kinds of movements.

If you have social anxiety, or struggle with crowds, or you have a disability that keeps you from traveling, you have the opportunity to connect with people in the digital world. Social media enables us to expand our quantity of relationships.

For each advantage of social media, there also is a contrasting view. Studies have shown us that the wider we make our communities and make our friend base, the more it diminishes our quality and depth of relationships. Some would argue that social media is actually interfering with our ability to live and function in community. Some will say that social media is placing an emphasis on quantity, when what we really need is quality. Thinking about hundreds of friends that can take you halfway across the world disengages us from the here and now. Social media is simply a tool, and while it can add value, it can also detract from living fully the way God intends.

I think of the times I see people standing in a group and they all have their heads down and are looking at their phones, updating the status. Sometimes they are even texting to the person across the room from them. Is that living fully as a relational being, especially when you consider that 80% of communication is nonverbal and communicated through the eyes and facial expression. Sometimes, I will go to dinner with my wife and because I am an extrovert I begin looking around at everyone in the restaurant and I notice a couple whose head is bowed a few tables away. They had just received their food, and I thought it was great they were praying before the ate. I then noticed that they had

been praying for a long time and I was impressed until I see them pull out from under their table their cell phones. They seemed to be checking their email, while they are on a date. This is supposed to be a time of connection, when we gather for a meal. Is this what community has become? Is this what it means to be fully relational?

Every time I see those things, I like to think I would never do that, but of course I have. I am a pastor after all. I must always be available to everyone else because that's what God has called me to do, right? This happened to me the other day, and I'm getting ready to preach on this particular topic! This desire to be connected to everyone else can interfere with our most important relationships.

Can I suggest to you at the power of community is found in the depths of our relationships, or the quality, and not the quantity? There was a study done in 2004 that found between 1995 and 2004 the average Americans number of close confidants declined from 3 to 2 over that 20-year period. The number of Americans with no close friends jumped from 10% to 25% of the population. In the 10 years after that survey done in 2004, the number dropped from 2 close friends on average to 1, and the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 25% to 45%. This means that the more connected people have become electronically, the more loneliness has set in and it has become epidemic.

People may have thousands of friends on Facebook, yet they feel alone and isolated. As people post the highest of highs and the lowest of lows on things like Facebook, they find they might get a few smiley faces or frowny faces, but no personal connection. People will have hundreds of people wishing them a happy birthday on social media and yet they never get to hear anyone sing happy birthday to them or have a birthday cake or get the birthday hug or phone call. You can have hundreds of birthday wishes with no real interaction in today's world.

Social networks can talk and show us how big and how wide our

reach can be, but it can't help us to grow deeper and build community in the way that humans touch can. This is the real power of social networks, when there is a human connection that touches the heart, mind, body and soul.

That brings us to the story of the healing of the paralytic in Mark's gospel that we have before us today. In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, we read about Jesus preaching and teaching and healing throughout the area in the north of Israel, called the Galilee. Word of Jesus was spreading, almost real-time like on twitter! Jesus was heading to his home base of Capernaum and the whole town was excited. Here's what we read.

BIBLE ***1 When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was back home. 2 Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there was no more room, even outside the door.***

The scene is like a flash mob, showing up at the spur of the moment and overwhelming whoever's house Jesus happened to be in while he was preaching and teaching.

While he was preaching God's word to them, 3 four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat.

We don't know why the man was paralyzed, or if he even wanted to go. Maybe his friends were sick of listening to him complain to them and they forced him to go to Jesus. Maybe he really wanted to go, but had no way to get there unless someone took him. Maybe he was paralyzed by fear, or darkness or tragedy or crisis or loneliness or depression. Those four men, for whatever reason, were willing to bring him to Jesus.

4 They couldn't bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. 5

Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “My child, your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus recognizes the sacrificial love of the four men who had lowered down what I assume to be their friend, and because of **THEIR** faith, Jesus says to the man, “My child, your sins are forgiven.” He heals this man right there, on the spot, in the home with a new skylight. After being questioned by the religious authorities, Jesus simply tells the man to stand up and take up his mat and go home.

In that moment, the crowd was amazed because they saw the real power of what it means to be connected to God and connected to others. This is why Jesus tells us to love God and love others, because that becomes the source of our healing, no matter what we are going through physically or emotionally or mentally. We need God and we need each other.

This past week there were several suicides of young people, including a young man who was a student at one of our middle schools. Myself and Tim Schrag, our youth director, and Karen Wallace, our pastor of caring ministries, spent part of Wednesday at the school and the question I kept getting asked was, “Why does this keep happening?”

There are no easy answers to that question, because sometimes there is mental illness and sometimes there is this isolation or loneliness. Sometimes there are other factors that we never get to know about or understand. What I know for certain, however, is that you and I were made to be in relationship with God and with each other, and often times the culture in which we live encourages us to disconnect from God and each other.

Notice, in this story, that Jesus didn’t just heal the man but he offered him forgiveness. Why does he do this? Because in the first century, one of the common religious beliefs, was that if you had a physical ailment it was because you or your parents had done

something wrong. For this man, he had no doubt heard often that he had committed some sin and this was his punishment, to be paralyzed. In this powerful moment in the story, Jesus debunks that whole idea and is making unimportant theological point. Nothing can separate us from the love of God because God made us to love us. When we are struggling with loneliness or isolation or fear or some physical malady, it is not because God is mad at us but because we are human and as humans we are imperfect, fallible and fragile. Sometimes, bad things happen and it has nothing to do with whether we are good or not. Sometimes, life is not fair, and we can't fix it or make it better.

What we can do, is recognize that those moments do not define us and make us who we are. When we experience tragedy or heartache or any other human emotion, it's because we are human and we are meant to know that God loves us through each of those moments and we are meant to experience that through others who come alongside of us. We need God and we need each other. We can push God and other people away when things don't go our way, and then what do we have left? We have the pain and hurt and the anguish and whatever else it is we are feeling, but we have lost what we need most to discover purpose and meaning and hope.

This is why I ask you all the time as your pastor this critical question: Who are those three or four friends who will carry you to Jesus when you can't make it on your own? We all get there someday, which is why we need other people and we need God.

This weekend is confirmation weekend, when we celebrate students in 8th grade and older who have decided to spend this year together, forming community. While it is good for them to learn about the faith and to claim this faith as their own, one of the most important things that happens to them is being with others who are struggling in life with them. I interviewed each one of them before this weekend, and every single one of them said that one of the most important parts of confirmation has been sharing this time with the other students in

the room.

One of the questions I asked them is how confirmation will make a difference in their future, and almost every one of them said that confirmation has taught them that there will be ups and downs in life and other kids experience that to, and that God will be with them in all those moments. Every week when the kids join together, one of the first things they do is share a “happy,” and “crappy.” I wanted to warn you about this because it’s on the video!

Just that experience of sharing those things with other people can change us and help us to realize that we aren’t alone. We need each other and we need God. The early church talked about this as “Koinonia,” a word used more than 20 times in the New Testament. The best description of this comes in the book of Acts, chapter 2, where Luke describes this idea of community.

BIBLE *42 All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer.*
43 A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.
44 And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. 45 They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.
46 They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—47 all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

The earliest Christians devoted their time to living sacrificially and spending time in fellowship and sharing meals and praying together. They sold their property and possessions and share the money with those in need. This had nothing to do with numbers, but the numbers

came when they focused on loving people and loving God. Day by day, people began to show up because when we build community, that changes us.

Our purpose in this church is to, under the authority of Christ, become a community of Jesus followers for the transformation of the world. Being a community together means loving God and loving others, so we can experience Jesus Christ standing in our presence, transforming us and then through us, the community.

This last week, Pastor Karen led a healing service for our staff time on Wednesday. We gathered here, in this place, at the front of the sanctuary as we do each month, to pray for all of you who will gather for worship, but this time we focused on those we have lost this last year. Karen put a list together, and it turns out we have done almost 2 funerals a month for the past year. We brought a list of those names, and as I looked down the list I found myself remembering many of those funerals that I did. Not once, in any of those funerals, or any that I have done really, has anyone mentioned a powerful status update that person posted once. They don't mention a Twitter post or a blog entry or anything digital quite frankly.

What we remember, is the life they lived. We remember quality conversations and experiences while we are in their presence. We remember meals that are shared and the sacred and tender moments where life was shared together. We remember times where there were tears or celebrations. We don't remember the happy birthday post on Facebook, but we do remember the happy birthday song's and happy birthday cakes.

We remember the way they lived. That's how we memorialize people. That's the legacy we remember when we gather to celebrate someone's life. Whenever I do a funeral, I often end up wondering, "What will people remember about me?" What will people remember about you? Will people remember us as loving God and loving others?

When Christ was here, how did he live? Do you know that right after this miracle story we just read Jesus goes and he eats with those who were considered sinners and tax-collectors. That is a communal event. For Jesus, salvation was a community event, not to be done in isolation. He healed in groups and he ate in groups and he blessed the bread on the night before he died with his community, the disciples. They laughed and they shared stories and they remembered in that last meal, what it meant to be community. That is why Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered, I am there. Whenever you eat and drink together, remember me."

He then sent them out to build community and share a meal and share experiences and be the body of Christ together. He sends us out to live a life of community that loves God and loves others, so we might meet Jesus face-to-face, in our gatherings.

As you leave this place today, I hope you will think about the communities in which you live. Are you willing to focus on the quality of those relationships and not just the quantity? Will you truly be present and live fully in those moments that you gather? Will you set aside your phone or your tablet or your computer so that you might discover faith together with your friends, like the paralytic did 2000 years ago. What do you want your legacy to be? How do you want to be remembered? Are you willing to go out and start making those memories, loving sacrificially God and others, so you might experience Christ in your midst who brings healing and life?

Let's pray.

SLIDE Prayer

God, help us to build community by loving you and loving others. We long to experience healing, so help us to realize it happens not just individually, in isolation, but with others and with you. If we are struggling with loneliness, help us to see the saints who surround us and find places where we can be supported and strengthened and meet you

in the community. God, if we have 1 million friends, and our Facebook profiles are so packed that we can't cut through the list to find the deep and meaningful relationships we need, give us the courage to focus and be present to the people around us. Equip us and fill us with your Holy Spirit, to live as your ambassadors of hope, wherever we go. May we follow Christ, building community in his name. Amen.