



Theme: B.L.E.S.S.- Loving Others, Changing the World
“Finding Faith in Friendship”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber, September 17-18, 2022, at Summit Church, Durango

Weekly Memory Verse:

⁵ Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “My child, your sins are forgiven.” – Mark 2:5

VIDEO Sermon Starter

SLIDE “Finding Faith in Friendship”

One of my favorite things about being a pastor is when I see someone who is a follower of Jesus bring a friend to church. Often it happens because there is a crisis or something challenging is going on in that person's life. Sometimes, it's because of a sleepover and kids invite their friends to come after spending the night. Sometimes, people have questions about God and faith. Sometimes, it's a person like young Sheldon in this clip trying to try to figure out faith on his first day of Sunday School with Pastor Jeff. In case you have not seen this TV show, Young Sheldon is based on the character Sheldon from the Big Bang Theory. He's a self-described scientific atheist who grew up in a very Baptist family in East Texas.

VIDEO Young Sheldon and Religion

While We laugh a bit at that scene, the latest piece of research I received just this week from the Pew Research Center and Barna Researchers is that only 64% of Americans would consider themselves Christians today and if the trend continues to accelerate the way it is right now among younger generations, that number will be 35% within 50 years unless there is some radical revival that happens. There are all kinds of people giving all kinds of reasons for this decline, but it really doesn't seem to be about being on the left or the right or the polarization we are now seeing because this same trend happens in every country where there is more affluent and more secularization, regardless of the politics or political persuasions.

Most people, however, are not like Sheldon and choosing to leave the Christian, faith or not even give it a chance, because of intellectual reasons. What most say is that they feel no need. They also mention that Christians seem to act like everyone else, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, so it doesn't seem to make much difference. It's interesting to note that the percentage of atheists and other religious groups are not growing while the Christian faith declines, and almost 90% of people say they believe in God, and 87% have a positive view of Jesus. They just don't see a need for a savior or Lord. They also are turned off by the shenanigans they see happening when churches or pastors or religious leaders take political stances and make bold statements that those outside the faith don't see connecting with faith.

SLIDE Relationship must come first

Here's one thing I've learned over the years. When there is no relationship, people could care less what you have to say. Our first task as followers of Jesus in today's world should be a willingness to build relationships. And, we should not be building relationships to convert people, but because we actually care about others the way Jesus did. Today, we begin a new series of sermons aimed at equipping us to do fulfill the Great Commandment and Great Commission by loving others

well. Jesus kept things simple when he reinforces the greatest commandments he has learned as a child of Judaism. When a religious lawyer asks Jesus what the greatest commandments are in Matthew 22, here is what happens.

BIBLE

³⁷ Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”

SLIDE Love God, Love Others

This is where the first two parts of our Mission Statement come from. We are to love God and love others. Jesus does go on at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel, in chapter 28, and gives us the Great Commission.

BIBLE

¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

GRAPHIC Love God, Love Others, Share It (Do we have this graphic for Summit Kids yet?)

We finish up our purpose statement with, “Share the Good News,’ which in our Summit Kids area we simply say as, “Share it.” Notice two critical things about these passages from Matthew’s gospel. First, what comes first? Love God and love others. I think Jesus is making this point that until we love God and love others well, we have nothing to share! He doubles down on this when he ends his words in Matthew’s gospel with...

SLIDE **“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”**

Now that is a committed relationship! The great commission and the great commandments only happen in the context of relationships with God, others, and us. We need relationships with God, each other, and even within us to do any of this faith stuff. It's important to remember that Jesus models this for us in his life, spending much time with others building relationships, and spending much time with God.

GRAPHIC **Sharing the Good News - Friendship**

The sermon series we begin today is based on this book, ***B.L.E.S.S. – 5 Everyday Ways to Love Your Neighbor and Change the World*** by Dave and Jon Ferguson. The premise of the book is both simple and profound and based on the life of Jesus. The authors sum it up well when they wrote, **“Sharing the Good News can be as simple as being a Good Friend.”** We have books in the atrium as you leave and many of our small groups are using them over the course of this series, including a group at Summit U which meets on Wednesdays at 6 for dinner and discussion which are meant to build relationships. Our goal is to take the fear out of being people of faith and learn how to let it happen naturally.

I think the biggest problem for us is that we think we need to do some “soul saving.” I love this one section of the book we must understand and get because I say it to you all the time as your pastor. I can't save a single soul. You can't save a single soul. That's not our job, so just let it go. **“You can't convert your family member, friend, or coworker. So, if you are feeling pressure to say or do something “right” so someone else can find and follow Jesus, the pressure is off! Only the Holy Spirit can do that! Relax and realize that is not your role. But you can join [God] in [God's] work and bless the people around you. Just do the blessing and leave [the rest to God].”** (page 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."

Beginning early in the 2000's, social media begins to take off and the hope is that people could discover community and develop friendships, 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 human connections and friendships, 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 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!

Can I suggest to you that 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 15 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 50%. 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 or Instagram or Tik Tok, yet they feel alone and isolated. As people post the highest of highs and the lowest of lows online, 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. Those online connections can show us how big and how wide our reach might be, but they can't help us to grow deeper and build community in the way that human touch can. We are wired for human connection that touches the heart, mind, body, and soul.

The scriptures teach us about this truth a Jesus enters relationships with both crowds and individuals. 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 online! 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.

BIBLE

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.

BIBLE

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.

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. We need each

other and we need God.

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 that happens in relationship**. Salvation does not happen 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. That’s why over the next 6 weeks we want to encourage you to read this book and learn how to do develop real relationships that are deep and meaningful. The book BLESS is an acronym that gives us 5 practical things we can do to develop quality relationships. By the way, these are all things I need to work on as your pastor!

SLIDE Begin with prayer

GRAPHIC Prayer Was How Jesus Began his Whole Ministry

I so appreciate one of the things we are reminded of by Dave Ferguson, “Prayer was not only how Jesus began his day, but it was also how he began his whole ministry.” I know it’s powerful for me to think about praying intentionally for each person I come across each day, recognizing that they each have their own story with their own joys and sorrows. I remember the words of C.S. Lewis who said...

SLIDE “I don’t pray to change God. I don’t pray to change others. I pray to change me.”

SLIDE Listen

The second letter in BLESS reminds us to listen. I REALLY need this one as I am a talker! It's helpful for me to remember that God gave us two ears and one mouth and it's best if we use them proportionately, meaning we listen twice as much as we talk. I love this reminder from the Fergusons in the book. "True listening may be the kindest and most loving gift you can give someone."

GRAPHIC True Listening May be the Kindest Gift

I think this could be a huge key to building relationships and changing the world. We live in a world where everyone has the right and opportunity to talk, and we often do that without listening. Instead, we just shout at each other even louder.

SLIDE Eat

The favorite part of BLESS might be eating for many of us. I know I like to eat. I try and go out to lunch at least 2 times a month with people who don't go to church or who have spiritual questions or maybe even don't believe in God. I don't try to convince them of anything. I just listen and ask questions...and eat.

SLIDE Serve

The first S in BLESS is a reminder to serve others. We must remember that Jesus gave himself away and did not demand his way. One of the reasons we give away our entire Christmas and Easter offerings is to live out this part of BLESS. It's why we serve locally and internationally, but the real key to BLESS is to serve daily in small ways. We can ALL do this easily and we'll learn how we might do this together and as a church.

SLIDE Story

The final S in BLESS is learning to share out story. The problem in today's world is that most people who are not followers of Jesus experience us as trying to share our story without every listening to

them or investing in that relationship. Evangelism can easily feel like an end instead of being embodied in a relationship. The truth is that we might Begin with Prayer, Listen well, Eat together, Serve others, and never see what happens next. That's okay, because remember that we can't save a single soul.

We should, however, know our story. Let's be clear this is not about telling others what THEIR story SHOULD be. We each must explore faith and find our own. No one can have your story, and no one can have your faith. Our story should be shared naturally in the context of those relationships we build.

I know some followers of Jesus have freaked out a bit when they hear the decline of the Christian faith in our nation. I must say I'm not that concerned about it. Remember that the church in the first century started with less than 1/10 of 1 percent in the Roman world and yet it changed the entire culture. How did it do that? Those early followers of Jesus described it 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 talks about the early church.

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. When we BLESS others that changes our community one by one.

One of the reasons I'm so proud to be your pastor is because I see you doing this, and hear about it, almost daily. I was visiting with someone recently in our community who does not go to church, and they know I am the pastor here. They said they knew many people at Summit and how great they were, even sharing a story about how one of you had blessed their family. Then they asked, "What time are your services?" That's how it starts.

You should also know that every so often people will say they know someone who goes to our church and that is why they don't go...because they have seen that person do some not-so-great things. It may have actually been me as your pastor on the basketball court in some other competitive place where I have NOT BLESSED others! The point is that people are watching us and paying attention. That does not mean we need to be perfect. It does mean we need to apologize and do our best to BLESS others.

And that brings me back to Young Sheldon. Sheldon's mom is the religious one in the family who makes sure they all go to church each week. She even becomes the church secretary. But when a teenager girl in the congregation dies in a car accident, she has a crisis of faith and is not sure about God anymore. Let's see what happens.

VIDEO Young Sheldon and Mom

I love how it's in the context of relationship that Sheldon and his

mother discover faith. We need those relationships, and we need to work on them if we are going to BLESS others and see those blessings in our own lives.

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. Are you willing to go out and BLESS others, 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 online 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 by learning to bless others. Amen.

September 17-18 Order

1. Ely welcomes people and says, **“Do you think friends are important? God wired us for friends and community, and today we begin a new series of sermons focused on how we might develop and invest in friends, blessing others and ourselves in the process.”**
2. Two Songs
3. Jeff welcomes and invites people to greet each other however they are comfortable and be seated.
4. Announcements (Check News Section on Website)
 - a. BLESS Books
 - b. Small groups
 - c. Fill out the Connect card online and we will donate to the Garden Ministry in your name that feeds people in our community.
5. Invite congregation to prepare their hearts for the message.
6. Sermon
7. Prayer
8. Two Songs
9. Prayer and Lord’s Prayer
10. Offering SLIDE and Focus (Books)
11. Care Ministers (If any are present)
12. Prayers and Closing Thoughts
 - i. Prayer focus September is taking a next step
 - ii. New Members
13. Closing Prayer