

You've Got a Friend in Me: 1. Conquering Our insecurities and Fears

1 John 4:18-22

June 7, 2020

Pastor Steve Richards

For the past few summers, we have offered a movie series. The movies have helped us to see ourselves and our human condition and then we've turned to scripture to find an answer. I selected the movies for this series a few months ago – before we'd heard the word pandemic, before the killing of George Floyd and all of the protests. In a matter of months, it feels like our whole world has changed and last week I wondered if a series about friendship that features a cast of toys was the right thing for us. So, I talked with our staff about making a change, and we decided to keep this theme. Now is the right time to be looking at relationships. Part of forming friendships is learning how to be an ally. Being an ally means we are ready to come alongside others to pursue – not what's in our best interest, but what's in the other person's best interest. We all need to be allies, especially now. So, this morning, we begin this series based on the four Toy Story movies. The first movie was released in 1995 and people immediately discovered it wasn't just for kids. It is a child's story, but it has a message meant for adults. It begins with a conflict and then works toward a resolution.

The story begins on Andy's birthday, but this is not a story about Andy. It is a story about his toys which come to life the moment people leave the room. In these toys, we see ourselves and who we are as human beings. Birthdays are stressful times for toys, because they are afraid the new toys might replace them. In this scene, we see the brand new birthday toy that Andy brings to his bedroom. [Movie Clip #1]

When the new toy – the toy that everyone thinks is the coolest toy – shows up, what does Woody feel? The dinosaur asks Woody, "Have you been replaced?" And immediately, there is this inner conflict in Woody's heart – "will I be loved?" It's a fundamental conflict that we all face: are we going to be replaced? Will I be rejected? In the words of a song: "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" Am I loved? And for Woody this inner conflict is immediately followed by a secondary conflict with Buzz Light Year, because Wood is afraid that Buzz has arrived to take his place. And in the next scene, the other toys meet Buzz Light Year and we see that secondary conflict emerge. [Movie clip #2]

Wood is afraid he won't be loved. We all have insecurities, maybe not all of the time, but there are moments or seasons in life. We feel inadequate, fear of failure, fear of growing old, fear of other people stepping into roles that were ours. There is something deep inside us that needs to know that we are loved. We long for that – and all of our feelings of embarrassment, shame, and rejection stem from the fear of not being loved. Have I told you about my grandson? He was at our home on Monday and we've been trying to introduce our dog, Winston, to Basil, but it's not going well. Winston gets anxious the moment he sees Basil, and then he keeps trying to get between Basil and Amanda and his barking is constant. It got to the point where we had to ask our other daughter to come and take Winston to her house. Winston is afraid he's being replaced. Now that's a dog. But many of us know how this feels, a new person gets introduced to our circle of friends and all the attention goes to this new person. Or there's a new employee and other people begin whispering that the new employee is here to take someone's place. I remember being an associate pastor, and one day the senior pastor told me I would not be preaching much anymore because people were liking my preaching more than his. Insecurities.

There are ways that people try to compensate for insecurities. There's the people pleaser. This is the person who goes overboard, trying to make other people happy. There's the person who

is bragging and boasting all the time, desperately trying to convince others of their worth and value. And sometimes our insecurities end up hurting others - pushing others down, constantly talking about others and criticizing them. The worst are bullies – the most insecure people I've met are bullies. The gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us the reason the religious leaders put Jesus to death was they were jealous of him because people loved Jesus more.

In the movie, Woody is a good guy, but his insecurities eat away at him, and he becomes bitter and resentful and decides to hurt Buzz. [movie clip #3]

How do we conquer our insecurities and fears? That's what John tells us in this morning's scripture. **God is love... There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear... We love, because God first loved us.** The essence of God is love. God knows you and everything about you and still God loves you. God is love. We know this because Jesus laid down his life to show us God's love – even for those who would put him to death. Jesus' life and teach is all about love, and if you believe that and practice that, it has the power to change your life. And then John says: **This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.** How are we to treat our enemies? Love them. Jesus reminds us to pray for them, because something happens to our hearts when we begin praying. True love comes from God and it is more than a feeling. It's an action. It's the antidote to insecurity.

Woody and Buzz are captured by Sid, the evil kid next door to Andy who tortures toys. His plan for Woody is to tear him apart, and he attaches a rocket to Buzz' back so he will shoot into the air and blow up. Woody and Buzz are trapped, and when Buzz comes to the realization that he is just a toy and powerless to stop Sid, he gives up. Suddenly, Woody realizes Buzz has feelings, and Woody begins encouraging Buzz and that's the beginning of their friendship. [movie clip #4]

In the process of giving hope, Woody's heart is changed, and they become friends. The kind of love that comes from God is a love that acts on the best interests of others.

Friday night a week ago, I received an email in the middle of the night asking if our church would provide refuge to families living in the 3rd precinct of Minneapolis who felt unsafe to remain in their homes. I didn't see the email until the next morning, and I made a phone call to say, yes, we would do that. I didn't hear anything until Saturday evening when I received a phone call. Whenever I receive a phone call on a Saturday night, I take a deep breath before answering. My normal procedure on a Saturday evening is to eat dinner and then I isolate myself in our basement for the next several hours as I focus on the words I will say on Sunday morning, making sure what I've written are words that come from my heart. So a phone call potentially means I won't have the time to do that. This phone call asked if it was still possible for a family to spend the night in our building. It would be a mom, a dad, the dad's cousin, and 3 children – and she said, the mom is 9 months pregnant. After taking that deep breath, I said I would be waiting for them. Then I contacted Pastor Tami who alerted our mission team – and hearing that the mom was 9 months pregnant, contacted an OB-GYN in our congregation. As I waited for the family to arrive, I witnessed an amazing outpouring of support. Our mission team began showing up with sleeping bags, pillows, towels, toiletries, and food. And they began preparing a space for them. When the family arrived, they were at first confused by the number of cars that they saw. I told them we were here to welcome them. I asked the mom which hospital she was planning to give birth. HCMC she said and then mentioned she was 4 days past her due date and experiencing contractions. The OB-GYN was contacted who made arrangements that if necessary, the birth could take place at the Maple Grove hospital and she

would do the delivery. The birth didn't happen that night, but we didn't know that. Once we all exchanged phone numbers, and they settled in for the night, we left. I got to my car and I sat there for a few minutes reflecting on what had just happened. I realized the phone call that interrupted my plan for the evening was actually a phone call from God. I think God was saying, "Steve, there's something more important than talking about love. Love is doing. Love isn't love until you give it away."

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 7, 2020

Weekly Prayer: God of love and life, we give you thanks for all that we have been given. Help us to never underestimate the ways you can use us to bring healing and wholeness to the lives of others. Help us give with hearts and minds open to your possibilities. Let your love work through us to make pathways of peace, justice, and love. Amen.

Monday, June 8

Scripture: James 3:14-16; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

However, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, then stop bragging and living in ways that deny the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above. Instead, it is from the earth, natural and demonic. Wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and everything that is evil.

Brothers and sisters, I couldn't talk to you like spiritual people but like unspiritual people, like babies in Christ. I gave you milk to drink instead of solid food, because you weren't up to it yet. Now you are still not up to it because you are still unspiritual. When jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren't you unspiritual and living by human standards?

Observation: "This town ain't big enough for the two of us!" Feeling threatened by others is so common that the Toy Story script put this saying on Woody's pull string. We often excuse our insecure, jealous feelings as just human. The apostle James said "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" in no way come from God. They lead, he said, to "disorder and everything that is evil." Similarly, the apostle Paul told Corinthian Christians plainly that jealousy and fighting are unspiritual.

Application: Paul warned the Corinthians about their disputes about "belonging" to a favorite teacher (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-13). That turned their Christian life into a personality contest. N. T. Wright described the impulse to "so easily lapse from serious issues to personality-clashes, and from personalities to mere gossip, while all the time pretending we are still dealing with important matters....They may think they're very sophisticated, but in reality they are 'merely human'." (commentary on 1 Corinthians) How is God moving you toward seeing what's truly vital in your faith, and not personality conflict or gossip?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to recognize my insecure feelings that can turn into destructive jealousy. Grow me into greater security as a beloved member of your family. Amen.

Tuesday, June 9

Scripture: Exodus 20:17; Romans 7:7-10

Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

So what are we going to say? That the Law is sin? Absolutely not! But I wouldn't have known sin except through the Law. I wouldn't have known the desire for what others have if the Law had not said, *Don't desire to take what others have*. But sin seized the opportunity and used this commandment to produce all kinds of desires in me. Sin is dead without the Law. I used to be alive without the Law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life, and I died. So the commandment that was intended to give life brought death.

Observation: "Buzz, you've got wings! You glow in the dark! You talk! Your helmet does that, that... whoosh thing! You are a cool toy! As a matter of fact, you're too cool." It's easy for Christians to brush past the tenth commandment, almost to see it as a "throwaway" just filling out the round number 10. Yet that commandment said in very simple form what Jesus said more broadly in his Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28). The apostle Paul, a rigorous, rigid Pharisee before he met Jesus, said it was the tenth commandment that made him realize he, too, was a sinner.

Application: The tenth commandment dealt, not with outward actions, but with the heart's thoughts and wishes. It said God cares not just about what we do, but about what we seriously wish we could do. It's not a sin to admire someone else's nice things. But has that admiration ever turned into an almost obsessive wish that you could have something (or someone) someone else has? In what ways has God helped you learn to draw back from that kind of extreme, harmful wanting?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that your Holy Spirit didn't just work in the heart of a great man like Paul. You work in my heart and mind, too, and I thank you for that even when at first your work may hurt as it challenges me to grow. Amen.

Wednesday, June 10

Scripture: Romans 14:1-4; Galatians 5:13-16

Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand).

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other! Two different ways of living I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires.

Observation: "I'm talking to you, Sid Philips! We don't like being blown up, Sid. Or smashed, or torn apart." In Toy Story, Woody and Buzz learned to work as allies rather than rivals only as they realized that the real danger was not each other, but Sid, the kid who mistreated toys. The apostles often had to teach early Christians the same lesson. They lived amid hostility from the Roman Empire and the Hebrew faith in which many of them had grown up. Paul stated the danger in intense, colorful language to the Galatians: "be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other!"

Application: In Galatians 5:13 Paul bluntly stated a truth that's hard for us to admit. We all have selfish impulses that can create insecurity and harmful conflicts. He pointed his readers to the one who can give us the ability to live in love: "Be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires." In what parts of your life do you want to invite the Spirit to empower you to more fully love even your different "neighbor" as yourself?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, free me from the urge to judge your servants. Replace it with a desire to allow your saving love to unite all of us who trust in you as our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Thursday, June 11

Scripture: Luke 10:25-37

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?" He responded, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?" Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Observation: "The important thing is that we stick together!" Verse 29 showed that the legal expert's question was as much about who his neighbor wasn't as about who it was. Jesus built his story around a contrast sure to upset many of his hearers. Distrust and hatred between Israelites and Samaritans was over 500 years old. Israelites then saw Samaritans about the same way as many of them view Palestinians today. Jesus portrayed two apparently pious Hebrew men who showed no interest in acting like a neighbor. Then he pictured a Samaritan who showed profuse compassion and caring.

Application: We usually see in this parable that we need to help others (a big part of Jesus' teaching). But Jesus also showed an Israelite accepting a Samaritan's help, though Israelites usually shunned such help. How secure are you in accepting help from others when you need it? Have you ever seen a time when asking for or accepting help opened the door to a neighborly relationship?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to recognize the "Samaritans" in my own inner world, the people I don't like to serve or to let served me. Move me from jealousy and insecurity to seeing them through your eyes. Amen.

Friday, June 12

Scripture: John 15:5; 1 John 4:16-21

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything.

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God" and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don't love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Observation: "But the thing that makes Woody special, is he'll never give up on you...ever. He'll be there for you, no matter what." In the end, Woody's security didn't come from trying to compete with Buzz. It came from Andy's love for him. Israelites often saw themselves as a vineyard God tended (Psalm 80:8-18, Isaiah 5:1-7). But when Jesus used that image he made it more challenging. The value of the vineyard, of any individual vine, came only as people stayed united to him like branches to a vine. The image led to a key object lesson: no branch grows and bears fruit unless it stays securely joined to the vine.

Application: Only God can love us with a truly perfect love. Why would John say that "perfect love drives out fear"? 1 John 4:20 got blunt: "Those who say, 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars." Do you agree that hating human beings rules out genuine love for God? Why would that be the case? Can you think of practical ways you can let God's perfect love move you in the direction of acting in love toward "others," even if you think they deserve fear and distrust rather than love?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me with a love so perfect that it will truly last forever. Teach me how to open my heart and mind to your love's transforming power. Amen.

Saturday, June 13

Scripture: John 13:34-35, 15:9-15

"I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

"As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don't call you servants any longer, because servants don't know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you.

Observation: “Woody once risked his life to save mine, and I couldn’t call myself his friend if I wasn’t willing to do the same. Now who’s with me?” From insecurity and rivalry, Buzz and Woody moved to genuine friendship as they grew secure in Andy’s love. At the foundation of all Christian faith is a deep trust that God loves us. This was (and is) a remarkable belief. Egyptians, Canaanites, Greeks or Romans—none of them believed their gods loved them. But Christians believe Jesus lived out that belief and showed us how it shapes life for the better. And that belief fundamentally changes how we relate to all other people, those who are close to us and those who are “other.” Jesus told his followers he didn’t call them servants but friends. And the most distinctive response he asked of them was to live in God’s love and to love one another.

Application: Jesus began John 15:9 with ten key words: "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you." As the moon reflects the sun’s light, our love for others at its best reflects God’s love for us. In what practical ways do you live out your commitment to love God and others? How can your church be, above all, a living model of God’s love for all people? To what extent are you able to view self-giving, not self-gratification, as key to the “glory” you seek in life? How well can you live into Jesus’ way of answering that question: “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want everyone to know I am your disciple. Guide me to live in such a way that the evidence of my commitment to you isn’t argument or cold truth, but a life of love reflecting your eternal love for me. Amen.