

Two friends were walking through the woods when they heard something behind them. They turned around to see a huge black bear lumbering toward them. Both men started to run, when suddenly one of them stopped to tie his shoelace. The other guy, with panic in his voice, yelled, “You don’t have time to tie your shoelaces. There’s a bear after us!” The first man replied, “I know that. But I don’t have to outrun the bear – I only have to outrun you.” What’s the old saying – ‘with friends like these...’ But my hope is that most of us don’t have friends like these. While I believe that the family unit is vitally important, a person’s friends bring a lot to life. An analogy I use is that if people were salt, our families preserve and keep us going, while our friends add flavor to life. Nothing can take the place of the biological family, but I know I’ve come to rely a *lot* on my friends. At various times of life, my friends have become my family – due to the physical distance between my mom, dad, brother and myself. When I was studying in France and my grandfather died unexpectedly, family members weren’t around. I relied on my friends for comfort and support. When I was in Ohio going to seminary, many holidays were spent at good friends’ homes. They took me in as part of their family during those high, holy days and I will forever be grateful. And then there’s just fun things I enjoy doing with friends like biking or playing tennis or going to pop music concerts that Mom and Dad just aren’t that into! And I’m glad they have friends to do their ‘older-type’ activities with as well.

So friends are very important in this world, but not *just* for fun and games. Did you know that being nice is most often a result not because of your genetics, not because of your family, but due to the relationships you make in a place of worship? A Harvard professor and a Notre Dame scholar spent years studying people to see the effect having religious friends has on a person. And they determined that the faith community you attend (or don’t attend) truly ends up having an effect on how you act outside its walls. If you form good, lasting relationships within a faith community, you are much more likely (3 to 4 times more likely!) to be involved in your community. You’re more apt to vote, to attend public meetings, donate both time and money to public causes, help both neighbors and strangers, and even let others cut in front of you in line. And the research showed it wasn’t because the people were trying to get into heaven; it wasn’t really because of the religious teaching either. It was because you tend to act and believe as your friends do. If the moral company you keep is actively trying to change the world, *you’ll* be more likely to make it a better place. Now I’d say God has some pull in the matter as well, but as usual, He’s willing to work behind the scenes to influence and guide – not force the matter.

So kids – and I’m addressing you specifically here, know that who you hang around with really IS important. Even as young as some of you are, you need to pay attention to who you spend lots of time with. Although it may be fun to hang around with the cool kid who’s always getting in trouble, unless *you* want to be in trouble for the rest of your life, you might want to rethink that. Friends you make at church can help you find the right path to be on, and give you an extra nudge to do well in life – becoming people your parents and God are proud of. Now I know you kids all think of me as this super-cool guy who probably was the most popular person in his school...right?? But in reality, I didn’t have many friends growing up, so the ones I made at church were very important to me. And I think I turned out pretty well...at least my mom told me that on Mother’s Day. Now just because you hang out in the church

and have friends there doesn't mean you'll end up being a pastor. Although it's a very interesting and fun job if that's what God's called you to be. But having friends who think, believe and act well will help *you* in life – both now and in the future. I know it's hard to think of what life will be like 10/20 years from now. But I can tell you that I believe I'm a much better person because I had friends who didn't get into tons of trouble and we still had a lot of fun.

Another person who would probably say he's glad he had good friends in the church is the apostle Paul. The Scripture lesson the kids read this morning is from Acts, the book that details the beginnings of the church following Jesus' ascension. And Paul was the one who went on many trips to spread the good news. But as we just heard, at times, those trips got a bit dicey. When that happened, I'm sure he was glad to have Silas around. We don't know a lot about Paul's traveling companion. We know that Silas was a leading member of the beginning church community in Jerusalem. He was chosen along with Judas Barsabbas to carry a letter to the town of Antioch to Paul. But it's highly unlikely they golfed much together or were childhood friends. After the letter was delivered, Silas stayed in Antioch and taught the new converts. Then, following a major disagreement between Paul and his first traveling buddy, Barnabas, Paul chose Silas to go with him on his second missionary journey. And although we never hear from Silas' own mouth, we imagine these two were good traveling companions. They were definitely there for each other. The occurrence in Philippi was certainly one of the scariest Paul ever experienced. They were simply trying to share God's love and ended up casting a demon out of a young girl. Sounds like a good thing, right? But, as another old saying states 'no good deed goes unpunished', this dynamic duo was captured, tortured, and thrown in jail for ruining someone's occupation. You see, the demon was used by evil men to tell people's fortunes and with the demon gone, the girl couldn't help them. So the court convicted the Christians of disturbing the peace, and even had their feet bound. All that for helping someone!

So you can imagine how important it was to have someone share that experience with you. Neither Paul nor Silas had to be alone in going through that scary time. And did you hear what they did to help pass the time? They prayed and sang songs. That's much easier to do when you have someone who likes praying and singing with you! So these two friends supported each other during a very difficult time. Having friends you can count on and have your best interests at heart is so important in this life. I'm sure we've all been hurt by friends who haven't quite lived up to our expectations. But I certainly hope you all have at least one friend you know is there for you through thick and thin; who, if necessary, 'sings songs to God in jail' right along with you. I love this quote by an unknown author: "A true friend is someone who knows the song in your heart, and can sing it back to you when *you've* forgotten the words." Friendships do come and go – often depending on jobs, age, and where you live, but know that if you seek friendships within the faith community, you already have a vital component of a relationship in common – a belief in God and the desire to help others. With that in common, there's no telling what you might accomplish together!

Just listen to what Paul and Silas were able to do by remaining together and following what God asked them to do. They were in the jail, conversing with the other prisoners, when suddenly a giant earthquake occurred and the jail basically fell apart! The locks fell off and the chains loosened – the prisoners were free! And yet...none of

them left. Now the obvious question is – why not? This was their chance – they could have made a break for it in the midst of the confusion. But they didn't, and I'd say it was because they knew God had other plans – which included helping the one who had kept them under lock and key. For when friends work together on activities that are God-centered, it's amazing what can happen. After the earthquake, the jailer gets ready to do something drastic because even though it was the shifting of the earth that let the prisoners out, he was still responsible. But Paul stops him, saying 'Don't harm yourself! We're all still here.' I imagine the jailer was dumbfounded at this point – the prisoners *hadn't* run away? Trust me – he was wondering why not as well! But Paul and Silas knew that their in-action at this point could help others believe in God's power, and they were right. The jailer immediately believed in their God and evidently had been overhearing the stories and songs coming from their cell, so he asked about baptism – not only for him, but for his whole family as well. Then the story gets even stranger, as the jailer – who would have been in deep trouble for allowing the prisoners to escape, actually takes two of them to his house! Pretty amazing! But the jailer realized that what Paul and Silas had to offer was even more important than his job. So they went, baptized the family, and got a good meal – all the while knowing the jailor could be fired or even worse when he got back to the jail. But he was now putting his trust in the Lord, and when that happens, you can't rule out God's power.

In the ending to this story that goes beyond what Connor and Camryn read, the jailor is informed the judges decided to let Paul and Silas go – without knowing they were already at the jailor's house! So it all worked out in the end – the traveling friends were free to spread God's word, and the jailor kept his job and became a Christian. Now of course, not everything we do – by ourselves or with friends – will turn out perfectly; even if it's for the glory of God. At times, despite our best intentions, things don't go right. But if they are done for God and asked for by God, more than likely they will succeed. So here's my question – and this one is for the adults (and the kids!): what can you do with your Christian friends that will make a difference for God? And the answer is: almost anything! I'll make sure you know of a couple we've done recently. Just last week, the church got a thank you note from the local Food Pantry, thanking our Kids Kare group for collecting all kinds of necessities for those in need. By doing this together, our kids were able to get so much more than if just one person had done it. It took everyone working together – Lisa organizing it, kids making up the flyer of needs, adults purchasing the items, and kids putting together baskets of the items. Do you know how much time and money that would have taken if just *one* person had tried it? That's one of the reasons God wants us to have friends in our church community – so we can do these good deeds together, and have fun doing them. And for our somewhat older congregants, we had the Community Care Day yesterday morning. We had ___ from our church participate, and most of the churches in our village took part. We went to ___ different homes of seniors who can't do yard work like they used to. By having about ___ of us together total, we could do so much more. If only I had gone alone, not even one house would have been completed. But when we all decide to help a cause, it's amazing what can get done – and how lives can be changed for the better.

Can we accomplish things on our own? Most definitely, but probably not as quickly nor in as enjoyable a fashion. And ideas and creativity flow much better in a group. Paul and Silas found that ministry can be accomplished and supported better

when there are several working together. So I close this morning with a thought about friendship. It *is* vitally important to choose the right friends – people who have the same values as you, and love and accept you for being you – just as God does. I agree with this statement made by Leroy Brownlow, a preacher and author: ‘Birth gives us our relatives, but choice gives us our friends. So if we don't have the right friends, it is because we made the wrong choices or pursued the wrong courses - no one to blame but ourselves. Thus, we should be slow in choosing friends and much slower in changing them.’ And remember that just as you aren't perfect, you can't expect your friends to be either. But together, just like Paul and Silas, we can soar. I close with words from Marilyn Meberg, the author whose story about her 3-year-old son falling in love I shared last week. “Have you ever seen a bird fly with a limp? I did so today. I'm not talking about limping about on the patio. I'm talking about limping about in the air. Most birds manage gliding, effortless swoops and turns which have always inspired my envy. Since childhood, I've wanted to fly as a bird does. But in this case, I felt no envy - only curiosity and basic disbelief. What in the world was this bird doing with its wings? Naturally I assumed it had been injured. Keeping my eye on him, I noticed no limping when he walked and did whatever aimless things birds do on the ground, but as soon as he took to the air, his erratic up and down surges went into effect again. I reminded myself that there's a little something wrong with everything and everyone in life. I looked at my gorgeous limper sitting exquisitely on a tree branch and felt a soft kinship. I guess neither one of us was in the best of condition. Though there *is* a little something wrong with life and wrong with us, there's a lot that's right as well. One of the most “right with life” experiences I enjoy is friendship. But the reality is, all my friends have little limps in their souls. They don't do things perfectly. They don't always fly straight. Sometimes they even lunge through their day. I love that about them because *I* have so many limping imperfections, so these limping friends are perfect for me.’ Whether we're limping or soaring, let us thank God we get to do so with friends who care, who share the same beliefs, and want to change the world as we do. Amen.