

YOUTH SUNDAY 2020: *In their own words*

We had 49 youth participate in this year's Youth Sunday, representing ten area middle and high schools. From writing liturgy, prayers and message, they worked to make personal connections to this week's scripture for themselves and for the congregation. From the friendship bracelets (thank you DeMarias!) to the banner with over 800 names to the reception, they planned a day that celebrated the friends they have found in this church family and reminded us all that we are called to be disciples in today's world, spreading God's message of love and hope.

Words of Welcome and Concerns of the Church

LUKE OSBORNE

Good morning and welcome to Youth Sunday. This year our theme is thank you for being a friend. We know that Jesus did not do his ministry alone. One of the first things he did was call his disciples. We also know the happiness we gain through friendship and from God's word. So we hope that this worship service today will remind you to be thankful for each and every one of our friends, including our friendship with God.

I'd like to ask you to pass the Fellowship Pad and be sure to welcome each other, new and old friends.

You see that we have a rosebud today. This is in honor of the birth of Clara May Swanson on July 8, 2019. Her parents are Julianne and Ben Swanson, and her grandmother is Jane Powell. There is a blood drive going on today in the breakout room of Fellowship Hall. As Mr. Neighbors challenged us last week, we all have extra blood to give! Please take note of the rest of the announcements in the insert along with a calendar of events happening at church this week.

And now I'd like to invite James to come up with a moment for mission.

Moment for Mission

JAMES WILLIAMS

I'm sure all of you know we are going to Puerto Rico this summer on a mission trip. There are 33 youth and adults going this year!

Puerto Rico has been battling natural disasters - Hurricane Maria and the recent earthquakes. These disasters have left many homes and environments destroyed. By going on this mission trip, we hope to help the people most affected. We will be repairing roofs, clearing debris and most importantly reminding our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico that they are not alone.

Please help fund our trip by buying one of these cool shirts. We'll be set up in Fellowship Hall after worship. Adult sizes are \$20 and child sizes are \$10. Our church has a long history – 200 years – of helping people around the globe near and far. These shirts not only support our mission trip, they also celebrate our awesome church.

Call to Worship

AJ CARR

Praise the Lord! **The Lord's name be praised.**

Thank the Lord for this congregation; **we give thanks for our friends in this church.**

We come to learn about your love; **and for it to be sent out into the world.**

We come to hear the words of Jesus. **We'll go where your love and footsteps show.**

Praise the lord! **The Lord's name be praised!**

Call to Confession

CULLEN BRUNER

Jesus says “greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus gave his life for our salvation. Sometimes we fall short of his example but we are a people that believe in the power of God’s grace and forgiveness. Let us now confess our sins in front of God and our friends.

Prayer of Confession

KATIE SUE MARTIN-WILLIAMS

God of grace, you have guided us in our way, strengthening our faith and love of you and one another, but still we stray. We fail to forgive even as we have been forgiven. Help us as we learn to love ourselves, our friends, and even our enemies. Be with us as we come together as one community. Help us to embrace our differences as our strengths. In your name we pray, Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

ANN HARPER COVINGTON

Friends, hear this great news this morning, God’s love for us is everlasting. There has not and will not ever be a limit to the love he shares, no matter how many times he continuously forgives us. Together, we are all his children, and we will be loved by him for the rest of our lives. So, whenever you forget, remember that God is always there, will always forgive you, and will always love you. Thanks be to God.

Passing of the Peace

LUCY FERGUSON

Today during the passing of the peace, we’d like to ask the children to come up and help us. We have made friendship bracelets for everyone. As the children and youth greet you in peace, they will hand you a bracelet. Let this serve as a reminder that you are loved and to go and love others.

Since God has forgiven us in Christ, let us forgive one another. The peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. **And also with you.** Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.

Introduction to the Lesson

EMILY GASKILL

As you know our church has been following the Narrative Lectionary this year. Today’s scripture comes from Mark chapter 6. There are three stories included but we are going to focus on only one. So, you don’t miss anything, the other stories are about Jesus being rejected when he went back to his hometown of Nazareth and the death of John the Baptist. The confirmation class has been working with their mentors on the scripture lesson for today: The Mission of the Twelve.

Prayer for Illumination

EVELYN MOSER (ANNA CRUZ)

As we prepare to hear the Word of God, let us pray:
O Heavenly Father help us to clear the mind and thoughts within, still the body and the movement that comes along with it, to focus the heart with all it holds, and to let all three lead you to the word of God that follows.

John the Baptist

KATE MACMILLAN

Mark 6:7-13

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in

their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

It's important to remember that as Jesus called the disciples that most of them were teenagers or young men, not much older than the group of us in front of you today. As we hear from Jesus' friends and disciples this morning, we reflect on how we too are friends of Jesus and he to us.

Now, I'd like to introduce myself. I'm John the Baptist. I am a friend and mentor of Jesus - my job was to prepare the way. I'm also sort of a hippie. My favorite foods feature locusts and wildflower honey. I can give you the recipe if you'd like.

I baptized the people of Judea in the Jordan River and led the way for Jesus. I even baptized him. In the next chapter of Mark, I am beheaded by King Herod because I told him he shouldn't have married his brother's wife. Oops. Anyways, it was nice to meet you! Now that we've met, I would like to introduce you to Jesus' other good friends - the Disciples.

1. Andrew

RACHEL HUFF

Hi, my name is Andrew. I originally was a fisherman and a disciple of John the Baptist. When I met Jesus, I knew I had found the Messiah. I am the one who introduced my brother Simon to Jesus. I am the first disciple called by Jesus and went to him without question. My brother and I were the ones who were casting our nets on a beach at the Sea of Galilee when Jesus called us to become “fishers of men”. In my final years of life, I refused to make a sacrifice to the heathen gods in the City of Patras. This is what got me crucified. I begged for an “X” shaped cross for I did not want to be crucified on the same type of cross as Jesus because I was not worthy. The cross is now known in Scotland as the Saint Andrews cross. You can see it here on my shield.

2. Simon Peter

BEN NESS

Hello, I am Andrew's brother. My name is Simon, but you may also know me by my nickname of Peter. Jesus gave me the nickname Peter, which means ‘rock’ because he knew I was one of his most faithful disciples and he hoped I would be the “rock” or foundation of the Christian church. As Andrew told you, Jesus first met me when I was just a Galilean fisherman, but then I became one of his disciples. Although I might appear to be shy on the outside, I am very strong in my beliefs about Jesus. Even though I denied him three different times he always believed in me. You may be able to remember me from my crest. The red background is because of the sermon I gave on Pentecost saying Jesus was the Messiah. The two keys represent the “Keys of the Church” which Jesus gave to me because of my faith in him being the Messiah. I was also killed on a cross for following Jesus, but it was upside-down.

3. Simon

LANE HOLLOWAY (PARKER MIDDLETON)

My name is also Simon and you probably know me from the Gospels of Mathew and Mark. They may not talk about me that much, because I like to keep to myself but I am a fighter for the people. I was a member of the Zealots which means I wasn't a fan of Roman Law. I fought for God's law! Like most of my disciple friends, I am from Galilee. I was martyred in Persia where I was trying to share the story of Jesus' life and resurrection. The fish on my crest is a symbol of me as a fisherman who became a fisher of men. The Bible represents my belief in the truth of Jesus' story.

4. Phillip

LORENZO FISCHETTI (GRIER MARTIN-WILLIAMS)

My name is Phillip. I am known for telling many stories about Jesus. Through my stories, I am great at spreading the words of the wise. I trust Jesus with my life. Though I am a strong believer, I still ask Jesus questions about God. And that's ok. I am also very loyal and will invite you to join me when I go visit new places. I have always helped others in need and was at the wedding when Jesus completed the miracle of feeding the 5000. Sadly, I also died by being crucified on a cross, but I requested my executioners to turn the cross upside down so I do not die the same way Jesus did. I thought it would be disrespectful to Jesus to die the same way as Jesus. When I was nailed on the cross and dying, I started to preach and they offered to let me down. I denied their offer and insisted that they let my friend Bartholomew go instead. My crest has two loaves on it to remember a day when so many were fed with the bread of truth.

5. Bartholomew

KATHERINE QUEEN

Hi, my name is Bartholomew! I also go by Nathaniel. I'm the son of Talmi who was the king of Gesher. In fact, the name Bartholomew means *Son of Talmi*. I was inspired to be a missionary when my friend Phillip who you just met, took me to meet Jesus of Nazareth for the first time. I thought nothing good could come out of Nazareth, but Jesus knew unbelievable things about where I'd been and that convinced me that Jesus was the true son of God. My encounter with Jesus made me realize that I wanted to spend my life following Him. I've traveled to many cool places in the world, like India, Ethiopia, and Mesopotamia spreading the word of God. After preaching in Armenia, they were so grateful for me bringing the Gospel to them that they considered me the founder of the Armenian church. When Jesus first saw me he said I was a man in whom there was no deceit. I'm loyal, persevering, dedicated, and hard-working. Because of my missionary teachings in India, I was persecuted and hung on a cross but Phillip saved me. Later, sadly, the acting governing officials flayed me with three knives, as shown on my crest. Because of my passing, history remembers me as a man who completely surrendered to my faith. I lived a good life, devoting it to Jesus and the spreading of my faith.

6. Jude

KATE NESS (ABIGALE BISHOP)

Hi my name is Jude! I am also known as Thaddeus and Judas. Some people have confused me for Judas Iscariot so that's why people started calling me Jude. I am also sometimes identified as the brother of Jesus. I am one of Jesus's disciples, but I am not a very well-known member. I was born in Galilee, and my mother is the Mary's cousin, so I'm related to Jesus! I am buried at St. Peter's where the Pope lives. Many Catholics pray to me for healing, and the St. Jude's Children's Hospital is named after me for this reason. Two weird facts about me: I'm vegetarian and I died from a saw attack! I am a very strong believer in Jesus which is why I travel the world to spread the Word of God. My shield has a boat on it to represent all the traveling I do because of my missionary work.

7. James The Lesser

JOHNNY CARR

I am James the Lesser, son of Alphaeus and quite possibly the brother of Matthew. The reason I am called James the Lesser is that I am younger and shorter than the other Apostle James. I lived with Jesus for three years and during that time, I witnessed His miracles and listened to His word. I was also one of the first witnesses of the resurrection of Christ. Not much else is known about me which leads some to believe that I quietly served the Lord and did not seek recognition or fame. The saw represents a part of my death. I was murdered because of the stories I was telling about Jesus. Kings did not like to hear about a new "king". But as we know Jesus was a different kind of king.

8. James

THADD PRUITT

Hey, I'm James and I was one of the first disciples. One day when I was fishing Jesus came and called for me to follow him. I immediately left all my things, including my dad. I was in Jesus's inner circle. I was there when He revealed his true self to some of his disciples, which was called the transfiguration. I was one of Jesus's most trusted friends and with that came a little bit of vanity. I was a firsthand witness to lots of the great things Jesus did, like when He brought a 12 year old girl back from the dead, I was there. My crest has 3 shells on it. They stand for my journeys with Jesus.

9. Matthew

WYATT HAYNES

Hi my name is Matthew. Before I met Jesus, all the people hated me because I was a tax collector who scammed people by taking unfair amounts of their money. My crest has three money bags showing that I was a tax collector. After the first time I heard Jesus preach, I changed my ways and became one of his very first followers. Most of the other disciples were younger than me when we met Jesus, so many of them didn't know how to write or read. That's why I was able to write the Book of Matthew. I believe that I was picked by Jesus because I was a bad person. Jesus can change anyone's life in a good way if we follow him. My life shows that through Jesus anyone even a criminal can grow and become a positive example. We all have the possibility to be a positive light in the world.

10. John

CAROLINA TURNER

Hi, I'm John, a fisherman, who fished with my family in the Sea of Galilee when I became a disciple. I was often called "The Beloved Disciple," meaning that I was Jesus' best friend. When Jesus was preparing to be crucified, he literally gave his mother to me to take care of. I was very passionate about my beliefs in Jesus, and tried to share a different side of Jesus through my Gospel. I wrote about many of the same stories that are in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but instead focused on persuading people of Jesus' power. My Gospel is less about places and names and more about how Jesus is the Only One. I was the only disciple to die from old age, while the others were all killed. My crest symbolizes the snake that protected me from drinking a poisoned cup. Bet you've never heard that story before?

11. Thomas

DAVID MAGRINO

I'm Thomas, also known as doubting Thomas. My real name is Didymus Judas Thomas. I like studying the real world. I like to make hypothesis that I can test to make sure the world behaves as I believe. When Jesus asked me to follow Him, I had a lot of questions. In fact, I have questions all the time; some people find this annoying. This is my way of understanding better. Did you ever notice that Jesus often answered our questions with questions of his own?! I think a lot of people also had questions and were able to relate to me. Through our questions I helped people to connect to Jesus and His Word. Some people may call me "doubting" as an insult, but I see my questions as a desire to understand more. My crest is a carpenter's tool with a spear. Before following my friend Jesus building things was my job. Once Jesus sent me out, I helped to build a church in India, but was killed with a spear for it.

12. Judas

ISABELLE SEWARD

Hi everyone. We are finally at number 12 – the last disciple: Judas. I know that most people here are familiar with the story of Judas. He betrayed Jesus with a kiss for 30 silver coins. But did you know that he immediately regretted the decision and tried to return the coins? However, the religious zealots who hired him refused to take his "blood money" back, and then, still racked with guilt, Judas hanged himself. After he did, the religious zealots repossessed the "blood money" to buy land that was called the "Field of Blood." Wow, that was a lot darker than what you hear in Sunday school. We have never heard about

Judas through his perspective, only the disciples who viewed the events through their own lenses. Judas was never even mentioned in the Bible before his betrayal, so we only have the acts of his worst decision on which to form an opinion. How is that fair? And to top it all off, it is thought the disciples were between 15 to 18 years old!!! How many of you have made bad decisions in your youth that you still regret? I know that I have.

I believe that Judas was an outsider among the disciples, after all he was the only disciple that was NOT from Galilee. I feel he just wanted to belong while struggling with his emotions. But instead of seeing him as human, he is only remembered for betraying his friend, which is wrong, but still, would you like to be remembered for your worst mistake? I believe that Jesus would have forgiven his friend, and maybe we should take a page out of his book and forgive the people who have hurt us as well. I believe that the Bible can be interpreted in many different ways. Today, we've tried to share another picture of Jesus' closest friends – the disciples. Just as we were sent two by two to go share the good news, we want you to remember that you have also been called by to be a disciple today.

Meditation 1

GRAHAM BLANKS

As we just heard about the disciples and their impact on Jesus ministry, I am reminded of a quote by Jim Rohn: "You're the average of the 5 people you surround yourself with." Although many people have heard this quote solely in the context of the social sphere, this theory is highly applicable in the business world.

Specifically, many knowledgeable businessmen and entrepreneurs know this idea better as the Law of Averages: The theory that the result of any given situation will be the average of all outcomes. For example, if a salesman wants to double or triple his sales, he must double or triple the amount of calls he makes. Consequently, while this businessman may double or triple his "yes's" through this process, he will also be doubling or tripling his "no's."

This holds true in forming relationships: sure, you may meet and get along with thousands of people, and ultimately friends, throughout your lifetime but you will also meet people that aren't as easy to get along with and that you may form no relationship with.

Typically, a common goal or belief is what brings groups of people together and this is evident with disciples and their journey to spread the Gospel. It's proven that humans are greatly affected by their environment, oftentimes being the people you're surrounded with.

If you asked someone what they believe is the "best environment" for a human, they would likely say something along the lines with being surrounded by people that are supportive of you. While this is somewhat true, it is also vital to have people in your life that are critical of your actions and want to push you to be the best version of yourself.

A study conducted by the Journal of Consumer Research found that novices tend to prefer positive feedback on their projects and work while experts heavily favor negative feedback. Why is this? With negative feedback, professionals are able to identify and correct their faults and issues, hence improving their body of work. It's essential to have a source of critique in your life otherwise you may overlook the flaws you have and never be able to fix them.

So what is a "good environment" for a human? For me, it is being surrounded by people in your life that will challenge you and push you to be the best, these people being better than you in a variety of ways.

Sure, it's great to be the smartest person in the room, but how are you improving yourself? This is found evident in the Bible in Proverbs 13:20, which says, "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm."

Fortunately for me, I was put into this exact situation as a freshman in high school. Prior to 9th grade, I didn't have an idea of what I wanted to do in life. All I was worried about was having fun, winning the flag football league in PE, and making sure to secure my spot at the lunch table before it ran out of space.

Thankfully as I joined the cross country team that year, I quickly found my "5 people" that God put into my life and little did I know how much they would change me.

The first person to have a direct impact on me was Ryan Iyer, a junior at the time. Being a timid freshman, I was relieved to be welcomed with open arms by Ryan to the team. Throughout the course of the year, Ryan and I grew closer and he ultimately became a mentor for me for the next two years. One of the most impressive things Ryan displayed in his life was his ability to balance his academics with his social life and athletics. When I found out his senior year that all 7 of his periods were filled with AP classes, I was surprised that he had friends at all, yet he finished the year as Valedictorian and was as socially active and athletically dedicated as anyone else at the school. Ryan now attends Columbia University in New York City and whenever he is home we make it our duty to spend time with each other.

The second person who impacted me as a freshman was Anna Marian Block. Ever since middle school, Anna Marian had been one of the best runners in the country. Her name had been echoed throughout the campus of Athens Academy ever since I came into middle school and when meeting her, I'm not afraid to say I was a bit star struck. Although we didn't immediately form a friendship in the way I did with Ryan, I was inspired by Anna Marian's hard work throughout my freshman year and particularly how she always kept a smile on her face, even when things were getting tough. I don't know if I would have ever found my athletic motivation if it wasn't for Anna Marian and her showing me the countless opportunities that running could give to you. Anna Marian now runs cross country and track for the University of Georgia.

The third person who affected me my freshman year was Jay Bangle, who I watched deliver his Youth Sunday sermon here last year. As a freshman, I was immediately struck by Jay's incredible perseverance as a runner. Jay, who's love of running reaches higher than anyone I know, was constantly plagued by nagging injuries throughout his entire high school career. Because of this love, Jay never threw in the towel: I watched as Jay continued to cross train throughout his three years left in high school: biking, swimming, physical therapy. His dedication had no end. The memory of Jay I will always remember was his first race back after three years of injury as Senior, where he went out and ran one of the fastest 5k's in his life, showing me the gift of perseverance and how it can be attained. Jay now attends the University of Georgia where he runs on the club cross country team with the same dedication he's had his entire life.

The fourth person that was put into my life my freshman year was Alex Branch. Alex, like all of the previous people, taught me many lessons throughout the three years in high school I had with him. Particularly, Alex was a mentor of mine ever since freshman year. Alex constantly challenged me to work harder, think harder, and strive to be a better person in general. He showed me how he moves through life with a hard work ethic yet still manages to enjoy every moment. Alex now attends the University of Georgia and is roommates with Jay.

Lastly, the person who arguably helped me the most in becoming the person I am today is Neville Anderson, my cross country coach. Coach Anderson has stood by my side ever since I was a freshman and has invested an unfathomable amount of time into me, all for free. If it weren't for Coach Anderson's guidance the past 4 years, I wouldn't be in the position I am today. Ultimately, the goals Coach Anderson has helped me reach throughout high school would have never been met if it wasn't for him, and much less even set in the first place.

Of course, these are only 5 people that have helped me become the person I am, when in reality I have been touched by thousands of people. My parents, my siblings, and the people that have been around me my entire life have impacted me just as much as these 5 individuals. As in our scripture Mark 6:7, Jesus wasn't able to do his ministry alone: He sent out his disciples two by two to spread the word of God. It's essential for people to rely on each other as Jesus did with his disciples, helping each other to strive to be the best we can be spiritually or in more secular endeavors. Either way, relying on each other is vital.

As put in Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

Meditation 2

CELESTE COVINGTON

When I began to study the scripture for today's Youth Sunday, I was drawn to the courage of the disciples as they followed Jesus into the unknown. As a natural introvert, my happy place is alone on my couch watching TV, but throughout high school, I've been pushed out of my comfort zone and have been amazed by what God has led me to through these experiences. Even giving this sermon is one of these experiences in a small way for me as I am incredibly nervous about public speaking, but I am sure I will get something surprising out of this experience that I can't anticipate. Over my high school career, I have been pushed into the "unknown" in a variety of different ways, and each time I have been led by God to discover something that has led me to grow as a person, as a friend, and in my faith.

Summer before my sophomore year, I went on a Moondance trip to Morocco. Moondance is a group that provides trips for teenagers from across the country to push themselves in leadership and service. I went on this trip only knowing one person, and I returned with many new friends and an exposure to a completely different culture. When we arrived in a small mountain town in Morocco which was the base for our hike up Mount Toubkal, we were exposed to a lifestyle totally different from ours where religion was at the forefront of everyone's lives. From the women's clothing to the daily national prayer played over the government loudspeakers, their approach to religion was extremely different from anything I had ever seen. Seeing how religion and faith impacted so many aspects of the physical daily lives of the people of Morocco, caused me to reflect on the strength of my faith as well as ignite my interest in religion across the globe and the history of these religions. Through this interest, I've broadened understanding of religion as a whole which has positively impacted my faith by giving me comfort in how beliefs and faith can live in harmony with the beliefs of others and with the teachings of these other religions I admire. On this trip, I expected great independence and the friends I made to be my main takeaway, but being exposed to this completely different culture was really important to my growing understanding of the world and my developing faith. While in Morocco, God led me to better understand the faith of others and thus grow in my own faith and understanding of what I believe.

The next summer, I yet again was sent into the unknown, this time on our church's intergenerational mission trip to Honduras. On this trip, I obviously was exposed to the lifestyle of people in this country which was incredibly moving, but ironically, I found myself finding a deep appreciation for our church community at home. As the only youth on my work crew, I had a wonderful time getting close to Mr.

DeMaria and Mrs. Osborne as we worked together mixing concrete, carrying cinder blocks, and trying to carry water everyday. Getting to see their work ethic and their understanding of why they were serving was impactful on my reflection of why I was there. On that trip having quality time to further get to know all of the adults on the trip as people as well as seeing their faith and dedication to our church, showed me how strong our congregation is. Being able to grow closer to these members of our church gave me more models to base my faith off of and take away from. When sent into the unknown, I ironically found that being away really made me appreciate our church community. While in Honduras, God helped me discover how lucky I have been to grow up in the supportive church community and lead me to adults who I can model my faith after.

As I go off to college next year, I know the opportunities for stepping into the unknown will only increase. I hope I can have the courage of the disciples to trust God through the journey into the unknown even when it will be rocky. The disciples were dedicated, and believed in Jesus so deeply that they ventured out into the dangers of the world at that time to spread the good news. The courage that they had stemmed from their trust that God would be with them wherever they went as said in Joshua 1:9, “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” As I step into the next phase of life, I hope that I can be open to learning and growing in my faith and as a person by pushing myself into the unknown with God by my side.

Meditation 3

MAGGIE DEMARIA

For the past couple of years, our youth group has challenged ourselves with epiphany words at the beginning of each new year. After starting high school, my epiphany word was support. I remember looking at the laminated cardstock and thinking, ‘I support people. I am a really good friend. What is God going for here?’. Mrs. Kim, noticing my perplexed expression, offered that it was possible that God could be hinting that I needed to be supported. I didn’t buy into this. I didn’t understand why support was my word, and I was reluctant to understand why I needed to receive it. And that is where two very special friends came in: Braden and Amelia.

Thanks to our school’s scheduler, I was assigned to classes with both of these siblings during my freshman year at Clarke Central. In my second period Spanish class, I got to know Amelia, a tall, sassy, confident, and persistent senior. As an upperclassman, she took freshman Maggie under her wing, teaching me the ins and outs of Clarke Central and how to survive in such a large school. In my seventh period English class, I got to know Braden, a goofy, sports-obsessed, intentional, and TALL freshman. Standing a foot taller than me, he always made sure that I saw the holes in the crowded hallways so that I made it to class before the tardy bell.

Since my freshman year, these two have exemplified what it means to be a forever friend, a forever best friend. Whenever something small happens, we let each other know. When something big happens, like some of our recent college acceptances, we let each other know... sometimes before we even tell our parents. Whenever we have a freak out, we text one another without even thinking about texting anyone else. My relationships with Amelia and Braden are great examples of how God often knows what we need before we do. God picked support as my epiphany word, and this allowed me to be open to the friendship and support of these friends, which God knew I needed before I did.

For the past two years, I had the privilege to serve on the 2019 Montreat Youth Conference Planning Team. My team worked and planned our two specific weeks of the conference, but we worked with a larger team of around 50 people to build the overarching plan for the 6-week program this past summer.

My area of focus for the conference was training and working with the adult small group leaders. The foundation of the Montreat Youth Conference is the time in small group, or a group of 30 young people from different churches from across the country, randomly assigned to be together for the week. In small group, the leader guides the youth through activities, scripture, and bonding to really break down the conference theme.

A large portion of my time on Planning Team was devoted to teaching the leaders about their manual, or guide, for the week, supporting the leaders through any bumps in the road, and ensuring that the small groups, conference-wide, were being run smoothly and effectively. As a 16 year-old, this should have created a weird dynamic. Traditionally, you don't find young people tasked with leading adults, but they accepted me and treated me as if I were one of them. When they had a challenging situation in their small group, I was there to listen, to check in. When I was having some troubles of my own, they sat and listened to what I had to say. We were truly there to make each other's experiences better, and we were able to mutually support each other.

Since then, I have stayed in close touch with many planning team adults and small group leaders. While I learned a lot from creating and working a conference for 2500 people, the biggest take away from my 2.5 weeks were the friendships that were made. Not only were these working relationships, but they were also mutually supportive, lifelong friendships that I trust God has put in my life for a reason.

In recent months, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how I will continue to foster these important relationships that I have created over the past four years. While I know that many of 'my people' are only a text or phone call away, naturally, I am afraid of losing them. I have found comfort in knowing that many of the relationships I have fostered at Montreat have stayed strong since we went our separate ways. The distance, whether it is to Cincinnati, Knoxville, San Jose, or even Puerto Rico, hasn't held us back from continuing to support one another.

This year, the epiphany word that God has challenged me with is deliberate. Again, just like last time, I looked at Mrs. Kim in complete and utter confusion, but I'm finding that everything fits together. God is asking that I deliberately make decisions to keep my friendships afloat and thriving. God is asking that deliberately I step outside of my comfort zone and look for new ways to keep important people in my life. God is asking that I deliberately work to make new lifelong friendships in college, and I look forward to trusting what new people God places in my path.

Meditation 4

GEORGIA BLUE SIMMONS

I literally need my friends to get through every day. I have learned that I can't do it by myself and the it is life. We weren't meant to live alone. I tried to handle a very difficult event in my life by myself. I didn't want to talk about it and I sure didn't want to you about it. It hurt and I didn't know how to handle it. And I thought I was supposed to know how to handle it. I thought it would get better with time and while time helped, it wasn't enough. I had to talk to people. I had to share what I was going through. It wasn't until I shared that I started feeling better. And I'm not completely better. I still have to share with people about this event.

But it's not just the big things. It's the everyday trials of life, and it's not just the trials. Just like sharing the hard things makes them easier, sharing the good things makes them even better. Part of the prompt for this sermon was to describe my motley group of friends. Because the disciples weren't perfect either. But Jesus choose them anyway. One of my close friends is a fabulous student. She is incredibly disciplined and

wants to be a doctor. Another dropped out of school, wants to be a musician and doesn't really know what her next move is. I could go on about my diverse friend group. Some follow traditional paths, others make their own. But what's great about it is that we don't have to be alike. And what is even better is that we don't have to be perfect. We don't have to be perfect to be helpful we just have to be present.

When I think of being present I think of mindfulness. So much today is said about mindfulness today. All I really know about mindfulness is keeping my mind where I am. To be focused on who I am with rather than thinking about what I need to do. To be focused on my friends' joy's when that's what they are experiencing. Their difficulties when that's what is happening. When I picture Jesus, He is talking to you like you are the only person in the world. He is focused on you. Right here. Right now.

Whenever I am talking to my dad on the phone and I ask him where he is. He says "I'm here, I'm always here. Where are you?" and as irritating as that is. And let me tell you it can be irritating. Here is where I need to be. Wherever I am, whoever I'm with. That is where I need to be. I think that is where we are all called to be.

Meditation 5

TURNER TRAPNELL

Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits.

In the Mark 6 scripture reading, we learn that Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs of two to go do his work and have power over impure spirits. He sends them in pairs and he demands that they bring nothing with them but what they had on. What He is effectively saying here to me is that as Christians we don't need extra stuff in life if we have friends surrounding us. When you have friends and you're spending time with them, you aren't as concerned about the other stuff.

I have learned a lot about friendship in the last four years. Before 9th grade, my family moved to Athens from Atlanta, Georgia. When people ask me if I miss Atlanta, it's always the same answer: No. I don't miss sitting in traffic for 20 minutes to go to school that's only 3 miles away. But the answer is always that I miss my friends. I miss getting to see the friends that I grew up with everyday. Early on when we first moved, I knew some people from Athens, so wasn't worried about making new friends, but realized that it doesn't just happen and that you have to put some effort in to meet new people and make friends. When I was a freshman, making friends was not as easy as I had expected. While people would certainly be nice to you, it isn't easy to just assimilate into a friend group that has been together for years. Think about your group of friends now, and how even if you might make a work friend or church friend, they often aren't immediately accepted into your group of lifelong friends. It was a process. And I never really thought about this, so it was hard. And at times, I sort of gave up trying to even have friends in my new town. I thought you know what, I've already got such good friends, I don't get to see them much, but it's fine, I don't need anymore, I'm good.

What I came to realize, and what is written in Mark, is this: we all need friends. It is human nature, it is the way God intended for humans to live. And I think that when it comes to friends, the more the merrier. In the Mark scripture reading, Jesus goes on to tell his disciples before he sends them out that they should stay in houses when they travelled, and any place that would not welcome them, they should leave and shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against them.

I find this to be applicable to my experience with moving because when you are in a new place, you don't really know who you might find a friend in, similarly to the disciples who didn't really know where they

would be able to stay, but searched and had to keep looking anyway. What I learned is that you can learn so much from everyone you meet, and that it doesn't hurt you to be a friend to anyone you can be a friend to. Meeting new friends is something that is important in life, and I have also learned that a lifelong relationship with a friend is one of the most rewarding experiences anyone can have. I am fortunate enough to be able to keep in touch with a lot of friends from Atlanta, and I am so grateful for that because I know that the longer you have friends for, the more you learn about each other and learn how to be a good friend to one another. The more friends that you have the more experience you have being a good friend, and that's important. I think that being a good friend is really difficult, more difficult than being a good person, because it's not hard to be nice to people you don't know and just see them as a passerby. You can hold the door for people, smile at them, pick up a piece of trash on the sidewalk. But being a good friend- that's really hard sometimes. It involves 24/7 patience, attention, and care. You have to deal with arguments, fights, rough patches, and you have to be able to listen and understand what your friends are going through. Being a good friend is what Jesus wants us all to do, and he says himself that good friends are all we need. Nothing else, no money or fancy clothes or cars, or expensive houses, just the sandals or shoes on your feet and a friend. What I say to you is to go out and make new friends. You never know when you might be desperately needed, or when you might be desperately in need.

Prayers of the People

ANNIE BLANKS/CHARLOTTE MOSER

Heavenly Father, thank you for creating us in your image, you've created us for relationship. We thank you for family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and pets. Especially for our friendship with Jesus. We ask for patience, support, and creativity to address our conflicts. Give us the ability to trust and be trustworthy in all areas. Help us build up the courage to accept others that may seem different to us. Inspire us to rely on one another and show our compassion to those who are sick, in states of poverty, hungry, grieving, victims of disaster, and suffering in times of war. Here now is the silent prayers of your people (20 sec)
As the Lord has taught us, let us prayer together...Lord's Prayer

Prayer of Dedication

JULIAN ATTAWAY

May God use these gifts to help and support those who need them the most. May these gifts explore hope and prosperity in those not as fortunate as us and install in us a newfound gratitude for what we have and been given. May your hands share these gifts with all your children. In your name we pray.

Charge

LUKE OSBORNE

Today we heard about the disciples being called to go out and share the good news. As you leave the Sanctuary, take a minute to look at the banners hanging from the balcony. We have written the name of each one of you as a reminder that you are also called to be a disciple today.

Benediction

JAMES WILLIAMS

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, our savior and friend;
May the love of God, binding us together and building us up;
May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, knitting us together as a church family;
Be with us until we meet again. Amen.

Thank you for supporting the Youth Ministry program of First Presbyterian Church of Athens!