

I. Advanced organizer

- A. This fall, we've been talking about friendship, in a series I've been calling "Friendship Matters". As it so happened, around the same time that I announced this fall teaching series, **an NPR podcast some of us follow called *Invisibilia* announced their own series on the topic of friendship, as well.** It seems that after a season of prolonged social distancing, and having a lot of our relational connections upended, a lot of folks have been thinking about friendship.
1. Listening to the podcast along side our series has been interesting. On the show they've explored a number of stories around different facets of friendship, as have we. **Perhaps the episode that I've appreciated the most just came out this week.** The episode was called "Therapy, with friends" and it explored what can happen when a pair of friends who've reached a challenging point in their relationship are willing to try an intervention that I think is pretty unique for contemporary friendships in our culture: **to go to relationship therapy together.** Think about it, what would it mean to you personally to go to therapy not on your own, not with a family member or romantic partner, but with a friend, specifically to work on an issue that may have arisen in the context of your friendship? How many of us would be willing to try it, and what do we think might happen if we did?
 2. In this episode, the **esteemed relationship therapist Esther Perel** actually hosts two straight male friends for a "friendship therapy" session and the result is revelatory and redemptive. These guys in their mid-twenties had been best friends since high school, but in recent years had felt themselves drifting apart. For various reasons, they were both feeling distanced and were wondering if the relationship could be maintained. Yet through the gentle coaching of Esther Perel, the two men were able to recognize how each of them had been operating out of insecurities in the relationship, how each had withheld things from the other in a desire to protect their friend, and also how each of them deeply valued the other and were distressed over the possible loss of friendship. As they shared, the two friends were able to enter into a more open and common understanding of their relationship and affirm how important it was to each of them, how much they genuinely cared about each other, and feel renewed hope and confidence in their friendship. In other words, **they were able to at least begin a process that I think is all too uncommon in platonic friendship: relational repair.**
 3. Now to be fair, **most of us will probably not have the opportunity to go to friendship therapy when a relational issue arises with a friend,** and certainly it's unlikely we'll have the chance to do so with someone with as much relational expertise as Esther Perel. But I don't think that's ultimately the point of what this story reveals. Truthfully, **you don't need to sit with Esther Perel to do the work of repairing a relationship that has been challenged in some way.** But for whatever reason, I think sitting with the hard work of repair is rare for many of us in the area of friendship. Often when it comes to platonic friendship, at least in our society, **it's much more common when friendships hit a rocky spot to walk away.** Maybe there's a big fight and we declare the friendship done. But I think it often happens in more subtle ways. Some offense takes place and rather than pursuing reconciliation, **we withdraw from the relationship.** We stop calling. Perhaps we even ghost the friend in question and quit answering their texts. Or we experience that happening to us and don't follow up to find out why.

- a) Now to be clear: **sometimes in the case of toxic or abusive relationships, terminating the friendship is absolutely the right move, and I would never want to suggest otherwise.**
- b) But as the episode on friend therapy points to, many relationships in our lives hold important value. And all meaningful relationships between people also eventually have conflict - it's normal and inevitable. The trick is having mechanisms to work through those conflicts and misunderstandings that come up in healthy ways so we can have meaningful lasting relationships that carry us through the challenges in life. And that means that **sometimes, even in our friendships, we need to do the work of relational repair.**

B. One of the things I appreciate most about the idea that Jesus was somehow a unique embodiment of the Divine, is the idea that God is not outside of our ways of relating as humans, but that God has chosen to enter into the messiness and complexity of human relations and model within all that messiness how to live into the kind of sacred love and connection that our tradition teaches is within God's own self. **So Jesus didn't just talk about friendship and how to regard others, he lived as a real human being with real friends.** Friends who brought joy and meaning and love to his life. Friends who let him down and broke his heart. Friends for whom he showed up to do the work of repair.

1. Today is our last official teaching in this series on Friendship. No doubt, we'll have more conversations around relationships in other series, but as we end this particular look at friendship, **I thought it might be nice to end here, looking at a story from the life of Jesus about how friendship can be approached after there has been harm in the relationship. It's a story from the life of Jesus about friendship repair.**

II. (Turning to the story.)

A. Let me give you a bit of a setup for this story. We're going to look at a unique little anecdote that only appears in one of the four gospels. **We find it in what seems to be kind of an epilogue to the Gospel of John.** Jesus has been killed and then three days later began appearing to his followers. He saw Mary Magdalene in the garden and then came a couple of times to be present with a group of his closest followers. And then John tells us about one more encounter.

1. The story starts with Simon Peter inviting a group of his friends who, like him, were fellow fisherman, to return to the water. They go back to the boats for an evening fish, and they fish all night but do not catch anything. In the morning, they're heading back to shore when what looks to be a stranger, a person they don't recognize, calls to them from the shore and encourages them to put out their nets on the right side of the boat. They follow this stranger's advice and sure enough, their nets are miraculously filled to the brim. We'll pick up there from John 21, verse 7.

B. 7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and

have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

16 Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

17 The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. 18 Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

- C. So here we have this unique little story - a story ultimately that seems to be about the relationship between Peter and Jesus. Why is it here? Why did John think it was important to share this episode?
1. Well I think it's helpful as we start to think about **who Peter was in the world in which this story emerged**. In the early church, Peter was one of the most visible leaders. He and the Apostle Paul were both heavily involved in starting spiritual communities and nurturing them, and of those two, Peter was the one who had known Jesus personally while he had been alive. He was the one from the inner circle that held the most senior leadership in the early church, the community in which the gospels were eventually written and circulated. But **the last place we see Peter in John's gospel before this story, he doesn't look like much of a spiritual leader**. Three chapters before Jesus is arrested. His friend Peter grabs a sword and cuts off the ear of one of the guards. Jesus rebukes Peter for it and then is carried away. And then a few verses later, we see Peter standing by a charcoal fire, warming himself in the night, and others at the fire recognize Peter as being a friend of Jesus'. Peter denies it. Throughout the night two others ask him about his connection with Jesus and he deflects and denies each time. After the third denial, the cock crows and Peter remembers that Jesus has specifically predicted this - that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crows, and even having heard that, he had done it just the same.

2. **So how does someone who has let Jesus down so brutally go from that kind of disappointment and betrayal to leading the community that is founded in his name?**

That can only happen through some sort of process of repair. That's why I think John wanted us to hear this story.

D. So what does this strange little anecdote teach us about relational repair? I want to pull out a few things that I think would be useful for us to note when we think about repair in our friendships or other relationships going forward.

1. **Repair includes leaning into shared connection over personal power.**

- a) There's something that Peter demonstrates here that I think is so indicative of the character we see in him throughout the Scriptures. Peter is an impulsive guy. He wears his heart on his sleeve. For better or for worse, you know where he stands. In this moment, when he realizes it's Jesus on the shore, he acts without hesitation. He doesn't wait for the boat to dock, he just jumps in the water and starts swimming. He wants to go for Jesus. **He wants to be connected.** He probably feels remorseful for what he has done, and he hasn't had the chance to encounter Jesus personally to show him how much he values him and so when he realizes Jesus is here, without thinking he puts logic and pride aside and just jumps in the water to go after him.
- b) This kind of moment, where we encounter someone we have wronged, it's often doesn't go this way. **Many of us have a hard time leaning into the vulnerability of connecting to someone that we know we love but have hurt.** It's a painful place to be, to have to acknowledge our own brokenness before someone we care for, someone we respect, someone we love. Not all of us can do it. I think often it's easier to distance ourselves. To maintain a sense of personal power through disconnection. We might justify to ourselves why our actions made sense or were necessary. To wrestle with our mistakes and our need for the other, can make us feel weak. This can be particularly true, perhaps for men in our patriarchal culture.
 - (1) On that podcast episode with these two male friends, Esther Perel shared an interesting insight from a therapist friend of hers named Terry Real. Dr. Real theorizes that **under patriarchy, men can often either feel powerful or connected. But they can't necessarily have both at the same time.**
- c) If there is truth to this, **it has profound implications for our capacity to experience deep connection.** Systems of patriarchy might socialize men to believe that to be connected to others means a sense of powerlessness, but that's only a part of the story. **Patriarchy defines power through personal agency and domination** - the capacity to make your own choices, damn the consequences, and impose your will on others. But there's another kind of power that isn't about being strong enough to be above something, exerting control over it, but about being in the midst of something bigger than yourself, the power of being included, accepted, loved that deep relational connection can provide. **Repair for Peter and Jesus begins with each of them showing a willingness to connect, and a desire to lean into that connection,** that vulnerable place of sharing power, instead of standing in the distanced place of holding onto personal power.
- d) There's a parallel story I've been thinking about this week that runs alongside Peter's betrayal of Jesus and the subsequent repair. **Because Peter, of course, is not the only close friend of Jesus' who let him down.** The last night Jesus was with his friends, he predicted two betrayals - Judas would sell him out to those who wanted to

kill him, and Peter would deny him. And of course, both of those things came to pass. But **days later, only one relationship is being repaired.**

- e) Often history paints events in broad strokes and makes characters into caricatures. Peter is a hero and Judas a villain. Peter, a man of God; Judas, in league with the devil. But is it really that black and white? **Perhaps part of the tragic reality of this story is that shame and its capacity to isolate us from connection is its own kind of destructive power.** In the wake of his betrayal, Judas took his own life. Perhaps his remorse did not lead him to connection with others, but it isolated him. To confess to the community around him how deeply he had wounded all of them was unbearable. That's understandable.

(1) And so the tragedy of how patriarchy can cause men to feel forced to choose personal power over connection played out in a devastating way. Rather than be vulnerable to those around him, rather than face their justifiable anger and hurt and allow his connection to others to bring relational struggle but also the possibility of repair, **Judas took matters into his own hands, a final act of personal power, with tragic consequences.**

(2) **What would have happened if Judas had not cut himself off from the possibility of repair?** What would his story have been? Jesus offered repair to Peter, he offered repair to Saul, a man who was persecuting his followers and trying to kill them when he had an encounter with the living Jesus. Is there any reason to believe that Jesus wouldn't also have granted Judas the opportunity for restoration if he had been open to connection in the wake of relational harm? I think it would have been a different story. **Repair includes leaning into shared connection over personal power.**

2. That brings me to the second thing we see in this story. **Repair includes taking responsibility for past wrongs, as well as the extension of forgiveness.**

- a) While Jesus and Peter never speak explicitly about what had happened the night that Jesus was captured and tried, there are ways in which the story plays out that make it clear that addressing those denials is what this exchange is about.
- b) First **we see the setting.** John used the term "fire of burning coals" or "a charcoal fire" twice in his gospels - when Peter denied Jesus and now. The setting can't be a coincidence, it's an opportunity for Jesus to connect with Peter around what happened without having to speak the words. The kinesthetic experience of bringing Peter back to the fire, feeling its warmth, smelling the same smells, returning Peter to the setting of the original harm is an invitation to do something different. It's an invitation to repair.
- c) Then there's the repetition. Three times Jesus asks Peter some version of the same question, and gets essentially the same answer. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks and Peter replies, "Lord, you know I love you."

(1) Three denials by Peter are met by three invitations to declare his love and commitment to Jesus. By the third time, Peter feels hurt by the question, but **that hurt is itself an opportunity to feel the injury he has inflicted, to sit with it, not to distance himself from it, but to own it.** And Peter accepts the invitation. Even in his hurt, Peter doesn't deflect and get defensive. He stays with the feelings and once again declares, even with greater openness and vulnerability, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." This I think, is **Peter's way of taking responsibility for the way he wronged Jesus.**

- d) For Jesus' part, **he doesn't hold on to offense**. Each admission of love comes with a command, a command to live into an identity that Jesus had previously called Peter into and spoken over him - the role of leader and nurturer in the community he had cultivated.
- e) "Feed my lambs". He says. "Take care of my sheep." Finally "Feed my sheep." It's as if he's saying, **"If you love me, which I know you do, care for those that I care for in my absence."** Jesus is entrusting Peter with the care of the community he loves. He's calling him not to a domineering, patriarchal form of leadership and power, but to be a nurturer the same way he had been; the same way he is nurturing Peter even now. **This is a loving act of forgiveness and restoration.**
- f) In some ways, I would find it more satisfying if Peter would have used the words, "I'm sorry for denying you three times, Jesus" and Jesus would have said "I forgive you." **There's a reason that we coach our kids to take those steps and that many relationship therapists talk about the importance of good apologies and also the granting of grace and forgiveness in order to repair relational harm.** But even though these ancient men didn't use those words, the sentiments behind them I think are being enacted. Peter is owning his wrong, and Jesus is releasing him from it and inviting him into restoration.
 - (1) That brings me to the final component of friendship repair that I think this story demonstrates:

3. Repair includes a shared vision of the future.

- a) In her conversation with the two young men, once the friends recognize and are able to articulate how important this friendship is to them, Esther Perel encourages the guys to **imagine together how they can show up in a consistent way for one another in the future**. She suggests a ritual - that every eight weeks they commit to doing something together, attending a football game, going on a hike, however they enjoy connecting. She suggests establishing that ritual so that it becomes a pillar of their life they can plan around, even as romantic partners and eventually family may come onto the scene. One of the young men expresses how he generally is nervous about "long-term commitments" but he feels game to what she is suggesting. **"This is not a long-term commitment." Dr. Perel responds. "This is a reliable gift."**
 - (1) It's a gift to know that your friend is going to be there on a regular basis. That you are going to show up for each other in a meaningful way. This is what Esther Perel was inviting these men into, and this is what they were excited to imagine together by the end of the conversation - a reliable gift in the future of one another's presence.
- b) Any relationship that is worth repair is also worth imagining together a shared vision of the future. What do we hope for together? How do we look ahead at what this relationship can yield? **The act of repair is in itself a hopeful act; it is demonstrating that the relationship is worth mending because the relationship has a future, and each person in the relationship has a future.** Each person deserves to face that future with wholeness.
- c) In this case, Jesus isn't going to be hanging around in the way he was before. He's not inviting Peter to resume sharing meals with him and long walks between towns as they had once before. This is a different season of life, and their relationship won't be the same in this season as it was before, but that doesn't mean that they can't look forward together.

- d) By calling Peter to take Jesus' place as a leader, as a good shepherd in a sense, acting on his behalf, Jesus is affirming his trust in Peter to embody Jesus' kind of leadership, and also he is affirming Jesus' commitment to be present with him spiritually, even if he isn't physically.
 - e) I think the ominous word Jesus speaks to Peter about the end of his life is part of the same practice. When he names how Peter will be led to "where he doesn't want to go", describing a martyr's death - this too is an encouragement that even in the harrowing moment at the end of Peter's earthly life, he will not be alone. He will be in solidarity with Jesus. Perhaps these words are meant to give him courage and hope even in the challenges that are to come. **Even in forecasting a trial to come, Jesus is giving Peter the reliable gift of his presence to look forward to.** Jesus will be there with him, leading him still; his shepherd to the end. Jesus affirms this in his final words to Peter: "Follow me."
- E. Two weekends ago, over thirty folks in this community gathered at a retreat center in the woods of Sonoma for a time of reconnection with one another and with God. As you probably all know by now, for the first time in Haven's history over the last seven years, I was unexpectedly not present. My family and I were home sick with an ill-timed stomach bug, but the retreat went on as scheduled. And from what I understand, the unusual circumstance of our absences also made space for a unique opportunity for discovery.
1. My greatest hope for the retreat was that it would give folks in our community a sense of Haven as a collective again in a way that has been hard to hold onto over the last couple of pandemic years. It's been hard to feel like a group, when we've been forced to do so much distancing. It's been hard to remember what it feels like to be in real connection with others, or sense how God might be in the midst of us. But at the retreat, it sounds like all who were there did experience a fresh sense of joy being together and solidarity in one another's presence. You weren't there ultimately to support me and my vision. You were there for one another. As the passage studied that weekend demonstrated, you were like sheep brought together from disparate places to be one flock, cared for by one good shepherd, who ultimately was not me, but Jesus.
 2. This is what I believe Jesus intended - to call us into healing through connection that renounces the false choices of patriarchy and leans into the power that comes from being in loving community. And you can't have ongoing loving community, without the commitment to one another to repair when harm is done.
- F. Friends, what would it look like for our little Haven not only to value friendship with each other and with others in our lives in a deep way, but also to **live into this as part of the reliable gift the Divine is calling us to embody with each other and with others in our lives?** What if rather than withdraw when we experienced injury or challenge in our friendships, we were able to stay connected, to take responsibility for the ways we have wronged our friends, to grant forgiveness for the ways we were wronged, and to imagine a shared vision of the future together? How might that enrich all of our relationships? How might it impact our community? How might that be a part of what makes this a safe, diverse, Jesus-centered place? How might it help us truly be a Haven for each other and for those we encounter?
1. I believe this is the work we're called to in this season of healing. The retreat was a beautiful step in the rebuilding of community, and there will be more steps to come. Some of them at some point, will likely include the need to speak uncomfortable truths and grant grace to one another with the desire to repair. My hope and prayer is that as we lean into that hope for connection with one another, we will experience the presence of the one

who modeled this grace and nurturing care so well, and we will find ourselves gifted with lasting friendship. Amen.

Questions for Discussion:

1. *What kind of experiences have you had with friendship repair? Where have you felt the lack of it?*
2. *How have you experienced the tension between connection and personal power?*
3. *Where might God be inviting you to lean into relationship repair? What might that look like?*
- 4.