

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 23, 2025)

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Sermon manuscript

Friending Up

(Genesis 22; James 2; John 15)

Introduction: Seed thoughts...

The message I've prepared for you for this morning has been percolating on the back burner for well over a year. It's something I've wanted to address, but the time never seemed right.

This biblical theme was like a seed planted in my brain, just sitting there, waiting to be watered and fertilized.

An opportunity presented itself to give the seed some attention, so I'm presenting to you the recently germinated seedling.

The seed has only just sprouted, so I won't pretend that it's fully developed. But the seed and now the seedling has stirred something in my own soul, and I'm eager to share my little plant with you.

Today, contrary to my usual practice, we're not going through a single passage, but are tracing a theme. And the theme for today is friendship. Not friendship, generally, but one very special friendship.

About friendships...

Our Bibles are collections of sixty-six very relational books, so we aren't surprised that we find in the Bible a lot about friendship.

It gives us lots of positive and a few negative examples. It also provides instructions for the development of the genuine article and warnings against counterfeits.

For instance, the book of Proverbs is rich with advice on friending.

On the one hand, Solomon gives warnings about "*friends*" who aren't really friends. They're just out to fleece you.

***[19:6] Many will entreat the favor of a generous man,
And every man is a friend to him who gives gifts.***

And some "*friends*" actually do more harm than good. The patriarch, Job, had three "*friends*" who were so hurtful that Job didn't have to go looking for enemies.

As we say, with friends like these, who needs enemies?

On the other hand, in Proverbs, Solomon sings the praises of deep, rich, friendships. Listen to these gems.

***[17:17] A friend loves at all times,
And a brother is born for adversity.***

***[18:24] A man of too many friends comes to ruin,
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.***

***[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.***

The picture that develops of a friend is of someone who is loyal, someone who gives you the gift of presence. When he's with you, he's really with you. She's the Velcro friend you want with you when times are tough.

The Bible gives us glimpses of these kinds of rich, soul-to-soul friendships. One prime example is the friendship that a young David had with King Saul's son, Jonathan, before David was king of Israel.

These two had great connection. They "did life" together. They encouraged each other in God.

God created us with a hunger for foul-weather friends, friends who are there when the storm hits. So, today, the theme is friendship, but not of the kind I've just described.

Friendship with a superior / Superior...

What I've just described is friendship among peers. It is any of us enjoying friendship with each other.

But, in the Bible, there are a limited number of times when we find the vocabulary of friendship used to describe the relationship God has with this or that person.

***By the way, I could not find one place in the Bible where anyone says, "I am a friend of God." (So, it is not my favorite song...) Always, friendship with God is something that either God Himself affirms about someone or an observance others make about someone.

When describing the remarkably close relationship God had with Moses, we read this - ***[Exodus 33:11a] So the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend.***

So, Moses was a friend of God. But most prominent example of a friend of God is Abraham.

For the next few minutes, we'll walk through a couple of episodes in Abraham's life to see the development of Abraham's relationship with God from start...to friendship.

Abraham: Justified Before God (Genesis 15:1-6)

The Bible's telling of Abraham's story begins (Genesis 12) when God called him to move with his wife and all of his possessions to the land of Canaan, the land that God was going to give him.

Once Abraham got to the Promised Land (he was seventy-five years old when he arrived), the LORD began to promise Abraham that he and his wife, Sarah (who was sixty-five years old), would have a son, and that from that son would come a great nation.

Years passed, and the LORD promised again and again that he and Sarah would have a son. Still, there was no son.

When we catch up to Abraham ten years after the promise was first given, he (now age eighty-five; Genesis 15), was losing hope in God's promise.

So, when the LORD repeated that promise...again...Abraham has something to say about that promise.

[Genesis 15:2] "Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ...[3] Since You have given me no son, one who has been born in my house is my heir."

Abraham was struggling, and the LORD saw his struggle. So, He met Abraham at his point of need and gave him a graphic illustration.

On that night, long before light pollution blotted out stars and back when the Canaanite skies were as bright with stars as the darkest skies of west Texas, God led Abraham outside of his tent and told him to look up and count the stars.

Abraham looked up. He then listened as God patiently told him, again, ***[Genesis 15:5] "So shall your descendants be."***

Here is Abraham's response: ***[Genesis 15:6] Then he believed in the LORD; and He credited it to him as righteousness.***

THAT was the moment of Abraham's justification before God. He was declared righteous because he believed - all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding - that God would keep His promise to give him a son.

That's a remarkable story.¹ Abraham, the father of the faithful, didn't do anything to be justified. He simply believed in God's promise. That is an essential part of Abraham's story.

We'll now turn from this scene to another essential part of his life and legacy.

The LORD fulfilled His promise to Abraham and gave him and Sarah a son, Isaac, when they were, respectively, one hundred (Abraham) and ninety (Sarah) years old.

As you can only imagine, Isaac's arrival was greeted with a lot of rejoicing. Everybody from all around knew that Isaac was the miracle child born to people who were too old to become parents.

As Isaac grew up, he would have been known as "the child of promise." That would have been how he saw himself.

In our next scene, Isaac is likely a teenager. Abraham was in his one hundred plus teens. Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac are quietly enjoying domestic life when, unexpectedly he heard the familiar voice of God.

Abraham: Tried, Tested and Proven Faithful (Genesis 22)

God Tested Abraham (22:1-2)

God called out to Abraham (v. 1)

The LORD simply called him, by name, **[1] "Abraham!"**

¹ God justified Abraham some five hundred years before He gave the Mosaic Law (Exodus 20). So, Abraham's justification could not have had anything to do with Law-keeping. As well, notice that Abraham's works - good and bad - played no part in his salvation. The sins he committed prior to Genesis 15 didn't disqualify him from being justified. His many acts of obedience had nothing to do with his getting justified. God justified Abraham on the basis of faith in His promise, alone.

² **"Here I am"** is a common response from people at critical moments. Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Samuel when a young boy (1 Samuel 3); Isaiah when God looked for someone to send His message (Isaiah 6); Ananias responding to God's call to welcome Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:10).

Abraham replied, **[1b] "Here I am."**² He was paying attention, ready for whatever God may say next.

The LORD's next words called old Abraham to the most challenging test of his very long life. God called him to act contrary to human affection, to his life's vision, even to common sense.

God commissioned Abraham (v. 2)

[2] Then He said, "Take now³ your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac,⁴ and go to the land of Moriah⁵, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

Abraham and Sarah had waited for a quarter of a century for the birth of their son, the fulfillment of God's promise. They were so happy when he was born that they named him *"Laughter."* (Yitsak)

Here, the LORD told Abraham to give Isaac back to the One who gave him in the first place.

Before, Abraham's faith had been tested and improved by waiting. Now, his faith will be tested and improved as he gives away what was most precious to him.

You and I know that human sacrifice was and is abhorrent to God.⁶ And, since we know that this is a test (v. 1), we know that Isaac will not be sacrificed.

But - and here is the critical point - Abraham didn't view this as a test. It was an assignment. Period.

³ Literally, **"Please take..."** In Hebrews, the particle of entreaty *"na"* - rare in God's commands. The sense is either that God had something at stake in Abraham's obedience OR that Abraham was free to decline it.

⁴ The weighty description of Isaac emphasizes the supreme nature of the test.

⁵ There is evidence that Mount Moriah was the site of Solomon's temple where sheep were sacrificed a thousand years after Abraham. (2 Chronicles 3:1) Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, would be sacrificed there, too.

⁶ Human sacrifice was a widespread practice in the land of Canaan in those days.

When C. S. Lewis remarks on this scene in one of his essays, he writes, *“The troublesome fact, the apparent absurdity...is precisely the one we must not ignore.”*

God has given the outrageous assignment to Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering on an altar.

Abraham Obediently Left to Obey God (22:3)

And the Bible tells us of Abraham’s instant, unquestioning obedience.

Early the next morning, he went about the work of starting his day, splitting wood, saddling up, and hitting the trail with Isaac to go straight to Moriah.

It would have been a several day’s long journey. And there is nothing in the Bible about any dialogue between Abraham and Isaac until late in the journey.

I read once how someone described the scene: *“This is father and son traveling to who knows where to do only God knows what.”* - but that isn’t true.

Abraham had known since he was a spry seventy-five year old that God was planning the future around his son, Isaac. He now knows that God was calling him to Mount Moriah to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.

His heart may well be breaking - but he was not confused. God’s command was clear. And He trusted in the LORD. He obeyed the LORD, implicitly.

The trip would have taken days to get from the place he left to get to Mount Moriah.

And when Moriah came into view, he stopped and spoke words of faith to the servants who traveled with him.

The Trip Up Mount Moriah (22:5-8)

Abraham voiced his intentions (v. 5)

[5] “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there, and we will worship and return to you.”

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews tells us that Abraham believed that God was able to bring back Isaac by resurrection, if necessary. He believed that whatever it might take to fulfill His promises, God would do.

Abraham’s rugged faith is inspiring. But I don’t believe that his statement of faith (***“we will worship and return to you”***) made the climb to the top of Moriah to sacrifice his son, an easy climb.

Abraham and Isaac climbed, together (v. 6)

[6] And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son Isaac, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.

The teen-aged Isaac carried the wood for his own destruction. Abraham carried the knife he planned to use against his son.

As the two climbed up, Isaac apparently felt a growing unease.

God will provide (vv. 7-8)

He was used to going with his father on trips to worship and to offer sacrifices. He knew what was supposed to be taken along for this kind of a trip. Something was different this time.

[7] Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said...“Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

And Abraham answered, ***[8]...“God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.***

That's Abraham. Trusting.

Abraham's thoughts must have been something like, "*The LORD has told me to sacrifice Isaac. But my Isaac is the Promised One. God must have a plan. Surely, there will be an animal...*"

I imagine Abraham looking behind every bush for God's provision. He never saw a lamb.

When he and Isaac reached the summit, Abraham didn't stall.

At the Altar (22:9-12)

Abraham prepared the sacrifice - Isaac (vv. 9-10)

[9]...Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound⁷ his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.⁸

Everything was in place. No animal appeared, so... ***[10] Abraham reached out with his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.⁹***

By this time, it had been days since the Lord had said anything at all to Abraham. That was a very loud, very long silence.

But at the last minute (last second?), a Voice broke that silence as the angel of the Lord came to Isaac's and Abraham's rescue.

God provided an animal and approved Abraham (vv. 11-12)

[11a] But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!"

⁷ Old Testament scholar, Bruce K. Waltke wrote, "*The binding of Isaac is the decisive moment in Abraham's relationship to God.*" This story is called, in rabbinic literature, the Aqedah (binding)

⁸ Abraham did the hard work of gathering stones to form the altar on which he would sacrifice his son. Then, this old father took his teenage son, bound him with

I really don't think that second "***Abraham!***" was necessary. The angel immediately had Abraham's complete and undivided attention.

He said, ***[11b]... "Here I am."***

With Abraham's every muscle now frozen, the angel of the Lord told him, ***[12a]... "Do not reach out your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him..."***

Until three days earlier it had been Abraham's belief that this God he followed hated human sacrifice.

During these three days, though, he was forced to wonder about this, to re-think this. But it was now clear to Abraham that his God, the LORD, did indeed hate human sacrifice. He now saw what we have seen all along. God had been testing him.

God was not after the shedding of Isaac's blood. He was after something else, which is clear as the angel of the LORD moved from commandment to commendation.

[12b]... for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

It is right for us to associate Abraham's actions with faith (Hebrews 11) and with love for God. But the angel didn't mention faith or love here.

He commended Abraham for his fear, his reverence for God. He commended Abraham for regarding God as holy.

And the glorious end of this story is that God did provide an animal (a ram) in the place of Isaac. Abraham untied his son, pulled him off the altar and offered the ram.

rope, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood that Isaac had brought up the mountain. It is impressive that Isaac didn't fight for his life but trusted his father.

⁹ The text doesn't say that Abraham actually lifted the knife over his head, although that is the sense I get from the passage.

[14] And Abraham named that place The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."¹⁰

Mount Moriah was the mountain of provision for Abraham. A thousand years after this scene, Solomon would build a temple where sheep and oxen would be sacrificed. They were God's provision for the people's sins.

And a thousand years after that, near the exact same location, Jesus would die on a Roman cross for our sins. God did not provide a ram to spare His Son; rather His Son became the lamb of God who took away our sins.

In our minds' eyes, at the end of this scene we picture Isaac standing shoulder to shoulder with his exhausted father, both of them witnesses to the Lord's mercy, grace, and provision.

The Lord provided, indeed.

There is a lot going on in this narrative. For today's purposes, I reduce it to three main items.

Lessons from Mount Moriah...

First, Abraham showed His ***"fear of the LORD"*** by his obedience to God's severe test.

We are struck by this every time we read it. Abraham was willing to offer his son, Isaac, on an altar...because God told him to do that.

It is tempting for us to walk through this narrative and to wonder, *"Why keep following a God like that?!"*

But remember the faithfulness and grace that God had showered on Abraham during the last twenty-five years. God had been so, so good to him.

And we need to realize, too, that in Abraham's day, all the gods were like that. Human sacrifice was rampant in all of the Canaanite religions. Abraham was surrounded by exactly this kind of human-sacrifice-based religion.

His quarter of a century of following the LORD (Yahweh), had led him to understand that this was not what this God was like. But, if I can put myself in Abraham's shoes, he may be somewhat torn in his thinking on Mount Moriah.

"I thought Yahweh was different from other gods. But this command is what Canaan's gods command. Was I wrong?"

"I don't think I was wrong. And I remember what He promised about Isaac. So, I'll trust the LORD that even if I have to use this knife, He will keep that promise."

"Because of what I've come to know of Him, I'll cling to the hope that Isaac and I will walk down the mountain together. But whatever He commands - even killing Isaac - that is what I'll do."

Abraham's was a *"no matter what"* fear of the LORD.

The second major thing going on up on Mount Moriah was that Abraham learned - he REALLY learned - what kind of a God this God he followed was.

After the provision of the ram, he understood that the LORD was nothing like Molech or Chemosh or Ashtaroht. He abhorred human sacrifice.

When Abraham and Isaac did walk down the mountain together after that harrowing scene at the top, Abraham knew more certainly than he had ever known that he served a faithful, gracious, compassionate, and loving God.

The third item arising from this narrative is one that is highlighted in the New Testament book of James.

¹⁰ This would be Moses' testimony, writing five hundred years after this event.

It is this third element that connects Abraham's experience on Mount Moriah to our theme of "friendship" today.

Abraham: The Friend of God (James 2:21-23)

[21] Was our father Abraham not justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? [22] You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected [23] and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called a friend of God.¹¹

We started off this morning by seeing that Abraham was justified before God by faith alone in God's promise. (Genesis 15)

Nobody was watching on that night when Abraham went outside of his tent, looked up at the stars, and believed God's promise. All that happened that night was between him and his God.

And that was when Abraham received eternal life.

It's just like we receive eternal life when we hear and believe God's promise that Jesus, who died and rose again, will give us eternal life. No works required. No works accepted. (See Romans 4:6)

We receive eternal life just like Abraham did - by God's grace when we believe.

But James says here that Abraham was justified *by works* when he offered up Isaac on the altar - and that was fifteen years after he had been justified by faith.

What James is saying is that Abraham's "work" of obedience on Mount Moriah spread all around Canaan. The servants at the base of the mountain knew what had happened up on top - and they spread the word!

So, everybody knew what happened up there. The news spread of Abraham's "*fear of the LORD.*"

And having already been declared "justified" before God by a faith that only He could see, Abraham has now been "justified" before people, by the works that they could see.

James goes on to say that because of that tremendous "work," Abraham was called a friend of God. He is God's partner, His confidant. The LORD was pleased to "do life" with Abraham. This friendship speaks of intimacy.

This - "***friend of God***" - is how Abraham has been known through the centuries by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

If he had not obeyed God in the greatest test of his life, if he had balked at God's command to take Isaac up Mount Moriah, he would still have been justified by God for his faith in God's promise. (Genesis 15:6)

But because he walked by faith, he also became known as God's friend. And he stands as the model for everyone who has ever wanted to be a friend of God.

Tracing this theme of being a friend of God has taken us from Genesis to James.

We'll make one final stop in John's gospel to listen as Jesus mentions friendship.

You: Jesus' Friend...When You Obey His Command (John 15:14)

John's Gospel: Only Believe (20:30-31)

John's gospel was written with an evangelistic purpose and that is clear throughout the book.

¹¹ King Jehoshaphat called Abraham God's "***friend***" in a prayer. (2 Chronicles 20:7) God Himself referred to Abraham as "***My friend.***" (Isaiah 41:8)

It is especially clear when John wrote near the end, **[John 20:30] So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.**

John tells us that what is needed to receive the gift of eternal life is faith. Believe in Jesus.

But there is a section in John's Gospel where Jesus was speaking only to those who had believed and already had eternal life, His apostles - minus Judas Iscariot. This section records words that He spoke to His disciples on the night before He was crucified.¹²

Upper Room Discourse: Love, Above All (15:14)

Mid-way through this section, Jesus was urging His followers to "abide" in Him - *"Keep following Me. Stay close to Me. Don't stray from Me."*

He then restated a command. He had already camped on this earlier in the evening when He called it His **"new commandment"** His New Commandment was that they should **[13:34] love one another.**

Then, He restated it.

[15:12] "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. [13] Greater love has no one than this, that a person will lay down his life for his friends."¹³

There is no doubt that this - love - was really, really important to Jesus. Love is central to following Jesus.

It isn't one of a dozen things we are to do. Love is what we are to do.

Becoming a more loving man or woman is the goal of life in Christ. This is His command. And He added, **[15:14] "You are My friends if you do what I command you."**

The key to being Jesus' friend is to love. That is His command and in that command all the other exhortations and instructions are fulfilled.

This **[15:13] "...love one another..."** is the New Testament equivalent to...
...[Genesis 22:2]... "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

To live for Jesus is to know that we are completely and totally and perfectly loved by Almighty God and therefore have inexhaustible reserves of love to give to others.

To live as Jesus commands is to be more concerned to love than to be loved.

Abraham's obedience stablished his reputation as God's friend. And when we love as Jesus loved, we establish a reputation as Jesus' friends.

When you face a situation where loves seems to be the hardest thing you've ever done, the highest hill you've ever climbed, your personal Mount Moriah...

...AND you love (give / serve / hold your temper / show compassion / speak an encouraging word when everything in you wants to lash out), you can have the assurance that your Savior is smiling as He calls you His friend, because you did what He commanded.

¹² We refer to this as The Upper Room Discourse. (John 13-17)

¹³ The New Testament uses the terms *"partner"* and *"heirs"* to get across similar ideas of intimacy with God.