

RELATIONSHIPS 101

Friendship Deeper Than "How Are You?"

Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; John 15:12-15

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This morning, I want you to think about the various levels of friendship: 1) I recognize your face; 2) I know your name; 3) We talk about things and ideas; 4) We talk about feelings; 5) We talk about needs and fears. Now, with all of these rich, vast possibilities available, why does the church stay so shallow and so timid about deeper friendships? In fact, outsiders are baffled by this. Here's how it looks to people from other parts of the world, visiting our large, smoothly operating churches. They see our size, our big programs, our prosperity. But then they wonder. Why are we in the West so indifferent about building relationships, community, friendships and intimacy? [I am indebted to Eugene Peterson for this thought, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p. 37].

Robert Putnam, in his groundbreaking book, *Bowling Alone*, says that this is the church's primary challenge--building connections, creating face-to-face relationships. And let me be clear about something. Being a friendly church is not the same as being a church which sets the table for friendships. The first is shallow and easy. The second is deep and difficult--but worth it. A pastor recently said to me something worth pondering: People who are already plugged in to a church have no idea how difficult it is to find your place in a church. Or, to say it another way, people are looking for community and get put on a committee!

There are many hindrances to friendship. Lack of trust, increased mobility. Also, technology tends to isolate people. As someone said, we'd rather watch reruns of "Friends" than have friends. What kind of problems have you encountered with friendships? Someone has abandoned you? Betrayed you? Or perhaps the opposite. Someone has smothered you with friendship? I read one lady's description of this. She said an acquaintance's friendship was like a shawl. It feels good around the shoulders, but smothers me if it's over my face!

Regarding friendship, the Book of Proverbs is full of pragmatic advice for successfully navigating relationships. Our two verses from Proverbs complement each other. A friend loves at all times (17:17), not during fair weather only. And while some people play at friendship, a true friend sticks closer than family (18:24).

Both of these verses serve as a great lead-in for the verses in John's Gospel, chapter 15. Jesus says that true friendship is measured by sacrifice (v. 13). In the First Testament, 1 Samuel 18, the friendship of David and Jonathan is highlighted. Jonathan was next in line to be king. His best friend David is a potential rival to the throne. A moving scene occurs when Jonathan offers David his armor. Most scholars believe that the act of bringing David his armor was tantamount

to renouncing his right to the throne. If that's true, it's not the only time someone has abandoned a throne for friends. Jesus did it, too!

Note that next, Jesus says true friendship is not based on empty words, but on deeds (v. 14). And then in v. 15, it gets very interesting. Jesus says his relationship with the disciples is based on mutuality, respect and equality. They are not slaves, but friends. Here is openness, vulnerability and honesty.

One other hindrance to friendship is using the other person for selfish purposes. Notice that Jesus declares friendship is not about using the other person; it is about valuing the other person. Not a slave, but a friend. Not control but connection. The other day a man said to me, "A friend just called and wanted to go to coffee. He didn't need anything. promote any product or try to sell me something. He just valued time with me. It felt good."

So, who's ready to go deeper in relationships with others? Who's ready to go deeper than, "Hi, how are you?" The New Testament word *koinonia* means much more than cookies and coffee after church. It means sharing something deep and meaningful, some venture of danger and risk. It's like the bonding that happens in an ICU waiting room between people who didn't know each other. It's like the knitting of hearts that people in the military experience after great danger in battle. Remember who we are. We were separated from God. God's enemies. Then Jesus comes along and calls us friends! This is the great adventure we share!

Jesus' discussion of friendship here is not just a model for us. It's more mystical and transformative than that. It's more of an "inside" job. Our friendship with Jesus offers us the energy, the umph, to replicate that friendship with others. The more of Jesus' unconditional friendship we receive, the capacity we have to give that kind of friendship. The more constricted our hearts become, cut off from Jesus' friendship, the less we have to give others.

Remember those notes we used to pass in elementary school? "I like you. Do you like me?" A box for yes; a box for no. When he was preparing for his first day of Kindergarten, a little boy asked his mom how long it takes to make a friend. How long indeed. A lifetime? Twenty minutes? But maybe we should all get started. Deeper into Jesus' friendship and deeper into others. That's where the fun is. That's where the fulfillment is.