

## Making Friends • Luke 6:12-16

My family moved when I was in the first grade and again when I was in the seventh grade. Changing homes and schools was difficult but the greatest challenge was making friends. It was especially difficult in junior high because we moved to a town of about 5000 and almost everyone in my class had known each other all their lives. I was scared. I was excited. I wanted to make friends but really didn't know quite how to go about it.

Like the rest of us, Jesus also wanted friends of his own. Not just crowds to praise him but friends to like him. He wanted some other men to hang out with, to relax with and share life with—to just be friends.

You probably know that he gathered a dozen men around him called disciples. Usually we talk about them with a measure of awe and call them saints. In books and sermons we are told that we, too, should be disciples—followers of Jesus. Maybe we have wondered what it was like to be Peter or Andrew or James, but seldom do we think of the relationship from Jesus' side. We often talk as if Jesus recruited his twelve disciples like the coach of an NCAA Division 1 basketball team or a CEO building a top flight management team. We think of Jesus choosing men he could later use to spread his message, to write his Bible and to build his church. While there is certainly validity in this, let's look at Jesus and his disciples from a different angle—the angle of a thirty-something man from Nazareth who simply wants to make some friends.

Some people appear to be so “together”. They seem so self-confident, self-sufficient—like they don't much need anyone else. It seems to me that Jesus was the most “together” person who ever lived. He always knew what to say. He handled difficult situations with

brilliant creativity. He faced difficulty with extraordinary grace. So, it is something of a surprise to discover that he wanted a group of a dozen friends. Not that they were his only friends, but apparently they were his closest friends.

Let's go back to one day when Jesus was alone—and perhaps lonely. Some say that loneliness is a universal human experience. Certainly Jesus was not exempt. I'm not sure how to define or describe loneliness. It's that sense that you are totally on your own, that no one else really understands or cares, that no one can help you and you have to take care of everything by yourself. Loneliness sometimes comes in the middle of overwhelming problems, but it can also come in the hours and days after unprecedented success. It can last a minute or a lifetime.

For Jesus, his day was full of success and criticism. He preached at the synagogue and was confronted by critics in the congregation who argued with him about a fine point of Jewish law. The controversy centered on a man whose right hand was disabled. Jesus wanted to heal him but the critics insisted that it wasn't right to do that on the Sabbath Day; it could wait until the next morning. Jesus decided to do it anyway. He concluded it was the right thing to do. They were so outraged that they began to conspire against him.

As much as we may want to say that Jesus did what was right, the truth is that for him, and for us all, it is difficult to have critics who disapprove of what we have done. Jesus needed to get away, so he went off by himself. The biographer Luke says in

Luke 6:12, “. . . Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.”

***Jesus knew something that we don't always understand—that God is our first resort and not our last resort; that prayer should precede our problem solving, not follow it; walking away from a busy schedule and spending a night in prayer can be the first and best strategy when life is hard.***

We are not told the content of that all-night prayer, but it is interesting and informative that when Jesus was under stress he went to God. Jesus knew something that we don't always understand—that God is our first resort and not our last resort; that prayer should precede our problem solving, not follow it; that walking away from a busy schedule and spending a night in prayer can be the first and best strategy when life is hard.

We don't know what Jesus prayed about. We don't know what God said. But we do know what Jesus did and we can probably guess what God said. God told him to go and make some friends. If he was going to make his life count, if he was going to survive his critics, if he was going to help others, Jesus shouldn't be alone. He needed to make some friends. So Luke goes on to say in Luke 6:13-15:

*When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.*

Out of the crowd of people who were interested in Jesus he chose twelve to be his friends.

Choosing friends is a risky thing to do. You might choose someone who doesn't want to be your friend. You may choose a friend expecting to get a lot out of the relationship and then discover that you have picked someone who drains you far more than energizes you. Friends can help but friends can hurt. Sometimes the person with the highest potential hurts you more than you could have imagined. Jesus was ready and willing to take that risk, so he selected a dozen.

There is nothing magical about the number twelve. It was the same number as the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve territorial tribes of Israel. But, maybe it was twelve just because it was twelve. As friends go, it was an unusually big number. Most of us would be glad to have a handful of really close friends. It is unusual if not exceptional to have a dozen close friends.

In some ways they weren't a very diverse lot. Most of them had much in common with Jesus. They were all Jews. They were similar in age. They were all men, although Jesus did have an unusual

number of women friends in his larger circle of relationships. Eleven of the twelve were from Galilee where Jesus grew up. One was from Judea where Jesus was born.

Simon was a fisherman. He was a natural born leader. He was loud, confrontational, impulsive—very different from Jesus. Sometimes we choose friends who are not much like us.

Andrew was Simon's brother, but he wasn't much like Simon, either. He was a softer spirit. He was a partner with Simon in the family fishing business on Galilee Lake. He had a heart for God and became a disciple of John the Baptizer. John later pointed Andrew to Jesus. When he met Jesus one of the first things he did was to recruit his brother Simon. He was a winsome and persuasive salesman.

James and John were brothers, too. They came from the upper middle class family of Zebedee with homes up north in Galilee and down south in Jerusalem. They were well connected and knew the political and religious leaders of their generation.

Philip was from the same hometown as Simon and Andrew—Bethsaida. It was a small town so, being of similar age, they probably had known each other all their lives. He had a Greek name in a Hebrew culture. It makes you wonder why. It's sort of like Mohammad in a synagogue or Sven in a Chinese restaurant. It can be done, but it's a bit surprising.

Then there's Bartholomew. Bartholomew's name is on all the lists of Jesus' dozen disciples even though others are sometimes omitted; yet nothing else is ever said to identify him in the Bible. Other than his name he is unknown to history. Some friends are kind of invisible but always there; Bartholomew, to his credit, always showed up.

Matthew was a tax collector. From all indications he was a good and an honorable man in a profession that was often maligned. Because some tax collectors were greedy and cruel he probably knew all the lousy tax collector jokes and put up with too much harassment.

Thomas was a twin. He was known for his courage and his analytical thoughtfulness. It makes you wonder why Jesus befriended two sets of brothers but chose only one of the twins.

James the son of Alphaeus had a mother

named Mary. Beyond that we know little about him. It seems strange that Jesus chose twelve close friends and two of them were named James. Maybe one was called James and the other was Jimmy.

There is another Simon to add to the confusion. This one is Simon the Zealot. It was like being called “Bill the Democrat” or “George the Republican”. Zealots were members of a nationalistic political party. Many of them were into guerilla warfare. The Romans called them terrorists. Some vowed to kill any Roman by any means at anytime and carried daggers hidden in their clothes. Terrorism is not new to our generation.

Judas the son of James is also a virtual unknown. He did ask Jesus a question at the Last Supper. He was nicknamed Thaddeus;

beyond that we don’t know anything else. Because of what happened with the other Judas, I suspect he preferred his nickname over being called Judas.

Last on the list was Judas Iscariot. Of the Twelve he was the only one who was not from Jesus’ home province of Galilee. We know quite a bit about the end of his life, but not much about the beginning. Apparently he was good with numbers and was considered trustworthy with money because he quickly became the treasurer of Jesus’ group.

Something in this short list appears curious to me. Of the twelve men two were named Simon, two were James and two were Judas. It must have been confusing.

Several were given nicknames by Jesus. Simon he called Peter. James and John were The Sons of Thunder. Thomas was The Twin. Judas the son of James was Thaddeus. Matthew was Levi. James the son of Alphaeus was nicknamed The Younger or The Lesser, probably because he was smaller in size or younger in age (like being Junior all your life!). Nathanael was another nickname for one of the Twelve, but we are not exactly sure which one.

Peter, Andrew, James and John were all fishermen.

Eleven of these twelve men died violent deaths. James was killed by a sword under the rule of King Herod Agrippa in AD 44. Judas Iscariot committed suicide. Peter was crucified. Only one died of old age and natural causes—that was John.

Some became famous; some we know little more than their names. Several were related. Out of the twelve, Peter, James and John became an inner-circle. They were closer to Jesus than the other nine. And out of those three there was one who was Jesus’ best friend—that was John.

These twelve became Jesus’ delight. For more than three years they walked and talked, slept and ate, took on critics and basked in the praise of large crowds together. They climbed mountains, sailed stormy waters, shopped markets, studied the Bible, prayed, argued, laughed, cried and shared

their lives. They were friends.

Modern soldiers who are brought home from war due to injury or personal circumstances often insist on going back. The top reason isn’t usually career or patriotism but friends. When people intensely share life together they forge a bond that links their souls. That’s the way it was with Jesus and his friends.

Picture the smile on Jesus’ face that stormy day when Peter jumped out of his boat and walked on the water to come to him. Imagine his emotions when these men pledged they would give up anything to be with him. Think how pleased he must have been when they said they would rather die than abandon him. See his excitement when they said, “Teach us to pray” and his delight when they memorized his words, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.” Grasp the significance when his own family claimed Jesus was out of his mind but his twelve friends stood up for him and stuck with him. They were closer to him and better friends to him than even members of his own family.

If you have very good friends you know the delight these men were to Jesus. And, if you have very good friends you know that friendship also means disappointment. Frankly, it was sometimes

*Count yourself as a friend of  
Jesus Christ.*

a two-way disappointment. They wanted Jesus to conquer the Roman army and he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” They wanted him to call down fire from heaven on unbelieving villages and he refused. James and John asked for personal positions of prominence in Jesus’ kingdom and he turned them down. As much as they loved and admired Jesus they were often disappointed with him. I think that must have weighed heavily on Jesus’ heart. It is hard to say no to those you really care about.

Jesus disappointed them, but they also disappointed Jesus. Jesus taught them carefully about humility and they responded with outbursts of pride. He gave special trust (all his money) to Judas Iscariot, but Judas betrayed him for an additional thirty silver coins. He asked them to pray for him when he was discouraged and suffering and they fell asleep. When he was arrested and needed them to stand by him more than just about any other time, only two of them showed up for his trials and one of them denied him three times. And when he was crucified, only John showed up to give him support as he was dying.

We all know what it is like to disappoint and be disappointed, but do we all know what it is like to forgive and be forgiven? Jesus wouldn’t allow the fractures in their friendships to end their relationships. If anything, the disappointments made for stronger friendships. He wanted them to be his friends for longer than three years. He wanted them to be his friends forever.

Some of the last recorded words to these friends are recorded in Matthew 28:20, “. . . surely I am with you always. . . .” When Matthew wrote this biography of Jesus he must have had a thousand different alternatives of how to end the story but he chose to quote these specific words from Jesus. Why? Because he knew their friendship wasn’t over. They were friends forever. These words were written after Jesus returned to heaven. Matthew couldn’t see him or touch him as he did during those first years together, but their friendship was stronger than ever before. Not even the distance between heaven and earth could diminish their relationship.

It may be easier to understand why Matthew recorded these departing words of Jesus, but why did Jesus say them? It wasn’t just for Matthew’s sake (or for two Simons, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Thaddeus or Nathanael). It was also for Jesus’ sake. He loved them and wanted to spend eternity with them. He didn’t want their friendship to end. He wanted to be with them always. He wanted them to be his friends forever.

I told you that our family moved to a town of 5000 when I was in seventh grade. I remember walking to school alone. It wasn’t far but it seemed like a very long way. I would walk back and forth to school in the morning, at lunch time and again at the end of the day; just me. It was lonely. It was hard. Then one day Dave and Judy invited me to walk with them. They lived in the same direction. They wanted to be my friends. It made all the difference.

Well, listen to this. Jesus wants to be our friend. He doesn’t want us to ever have to walk alone. But it’s not just that he wants us to be with him; it’s that he wants to be with us! Let his words from John 15:13-16 grab your heart: “*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. . . . I have called you friends. . . . You did not choose me, but I chose you. . . .*”

Jesus wants to make friends of you and me. He wants to add our names to the list: Peter and Paul, Andrew and Angie, James and John, Nathaniel and Naomi, Philip and Patty, Mary and Martha, Larry and Leith and your name, too. Count yourself as a friend of Jesus Christ.

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 Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
 6630 Shady Oak Road  
 Eden Prairie MN 55344  
 952-944-6300  
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