

Friendship – The Divine Gift of Belonging to One Another

Friendship has been and continues to be a hot topic in the American press and throughout the rest of the media. I think it is a popular topic in part because, although we have many contacts, many times we find ourselves in isolation — without very many friends at all.

Richard Farson, a professor in San Francisco, made what I consider to be a startling statement: “Millions of people in America have never had one minute in their whole lifetime where they could ‘let down’ and share with another person their deeper feelings.”

Whole books have been written about the topic of friendship and more recently, especially about the so-called friendless American male. Some estimate that only about 10 percent of American men ever have a real friendship.

Now this is not a simple subject. You might think it would be as simple as saying that if you want to have friends, just be a friend. Except many people do not have the skills or the opportunities to find friends. Many people define friendship differently. In fact, it’s been said that perhaps the reason that men are said to have few friends is because we are applying a female definition of friendship, which is quite different from the male’s definition of friendship. There are some who have more friends than they want and others who really try and never seem to be able to come up with a friend at all.

This is the beginning of a series examining friendships from the Bible. We’ll look at Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; David and Jonathan, as close a pair as any friends in the world; Ruth and Naomi, a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law who were bound together as friends by their common bond of widowhood. In the New Testament we’ll look at Paul and Timothy, a mentor and an apprentice; Priscilla and Aquilla, a wife and a husband; and many more.

We begin our series, sort of priming the pump, with the proposition that friendship is the divine gift of belonging to one another. The divine design of friendship is perhaps best expressed in the

Old Testament word “likeness.” On the first page of the creation story in Genesis 1:26, we hear God quoted using the plural pronouns, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.” The theologians teach that that is the first reference to the biblical doctrine of the trinity: the one God eternally exists as three persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness.

While we, in our limited understanding of God, cannot come up with the words to fully describe who and what he is, we do see that as separate persons the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share a fellowship, a bond, that is at the very nature of who God is. In creating us in his image, in his likeness, God gave to us a similar need. We were created for friendship and fellowship — both with God and with one another.

Turning a page in the Old Testament, still in the creation story, in Genesis 2:18, again God is quoted, this time saying, “*It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.*” You most often hear that verse quoted in reference to marriage, but we need to remember that the basic premise of that statement is that it is not good for man to be alone because man is created in the image of God and was never intended to be alone. Aloneness is not part of the initial design.

Humans were designed to be together.

Together may occur in many different kinds of relationships. It may be in marriage, in a family, in the com-

munity, in church or in business. People sometimes come together in a way that they would not otherwise in war or in sickness. It is part of God’s initial creation and his continuing likeness within us that we come together.

Much of the Bible can be understood theologically in terms of that friendship or that coming together, whether it be Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the Old Testament nation of Israel traveling out of captivity into the Promised Land, or the New Testament Church. Friendship is God’s gift of belonging to one another in order

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that we become all that God intended us and created us to be. Now that is not to say that there aren't times when we find ourselves alone and without friends, as Adam was before the creation of Eve, but that is not God's primary design.

The Bible teaching of friendship is not limited to creation. In fact, there is a great deal more that is said about friendships throughout the Bible. I'm going to give you three examples from the Book of Proverbs and one from the New Testament.

In Proverbs 18:24 we are told, "*A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*" Friendship is more than a long list of acquaintances. Surveys indicate that the average American knows from 500 to 2,500 acquaintances. And yet here we are told that a man of many companions may come to ruin. In other words, having a long list of acquaintances can be counter-productive if there is a lack of a few special friendships.

"*There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*" You may say, "That's not hard to imagine in my case because I don't like my brother and we don't get along very well" or, "I've always been at odds with my sister." The assumption here is that in the family relationship there is something that is quite different in closeness than is ordinarily found in the rest of society. But a close friendship between two individuals may be even stronger than family ties. That type of friendship is quite different from the superficial type of relationships that we have with acquaintances. A genuine friend is exceptional, someone very close, closer than a brother or sister.

Then in Proverbs 17:17 we are told that "*a friend loves at all times,*" in all seasons of life. A friend is someone who will stick close by you when you are soaring to extraordinary success but will not abandon you when you fall off the pinnacle of that success into the tough times of life. A friend is someone who will be a friend if you have money or if you are broke, if you are the picture of health or if you are on your deathbed from some terrible disease. A friend loves at all times.

Proverbs 27:6 says, "*Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.*" Interesting contrast. An enemy will load you up with flattery, just saying those kind and nice things for

his or her purposes. By contrast, someone who is really a friend will love you enough to tell you the truth even if it wounds you.

I have long contended that we can take just about any criticism from someone we know loves us dearly. Someone who is genuinely a friend can wound us for our benefit and we will take it. I cherish some very special longtime friends who can criticize me in love. When there have been times in life when I have had my vision fogged by circumstances, I can get together with them or call them on the telephone and they will give me a straight answer. If need be, they will wound me because they are good enough friends to do that. And, if need be, they will bandage up my wounds.

But I suppose the greatest of all the Bible verses that talk about friendship is John 15:13. The conversation took place between Jesus and his disciples as they walked between Jerusalem and Bethlehem nearing the time of his crucifixion. As they were walking, Jesus turned to his disciples and said; "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*" Surely this must be the ultimate test of friendship.

You hear a verse like that and you begin to think to yourself, "Who would die for me?" If our political circumstances were to suddenly change and an outside force invaded us, if you were about to be executed, is there anyone you could call up and say, "What are you doing today? Would you be willing to die for me?"

Or how long a list do we have of those for whom we would be willing to die? Most of us would have a very short list. We wouldn't have to write it down because there are not very many people, if any, for whom we would be willing to give up our life.

While the verse applies to our friendships with one another, its primary teaching has to do with Jesus' friendship with us. He is the ultimate friend in that he called us his friends and he was not only willing, but he did die on our behalf.

Actually, I'm reluctant to give a simple definition of friendship — because I think it is very complex. Friendship varies from relationship to relationship and incorporates all the things that these four Bible verses say and more, much more. Friendship is a relationship between two people that includes love, commitment, loyalty, durabil-

ity and mutual interests. It is belonging – belonging to one another. It is a very special gift from God.

Now if that's the divine design, how do we look at it from the human side? A great deal of research has been done about friendship. You can find articles in everything from Time Magazine to Good Housekeeping or Psychology Today. Every bookstore has a whole list of titles under the section on friendship. We know from our own experience and from research that most people have very few friends. In fact, many people have no truly close friends at all, those with whom they can share the inner most thoughts and feelings.

This is especially true of men. Men are even less likely to have close friends than women and women value their friendships more. Researchers give all kinds of possible explanations for this, saying that from early boyhood men are taught to compete with other males and that kind of competition precludes friendship — you cannot trust your competitor. There are others who say that fear of the appearance of homosexuality makes men keep their distance from other men. Other explanations include the lack

of role models, boys have grown up in homes where they never saw their father have a close friend, they've gone into businesses where the boss never seems to have anyone that he is particularly close to, and so all through life they have no example to follow. Whatever the reason, most men have superficial relationships as compared to the deeper and more intimate friendships of women.

Friendships are very complex interpersonal relationships. They seem to defy simple formulas. Friendships take a long time to develop, they take a great deal of energy and work to maintain. You don't just stumble upon a friendship and then have it last for a lifetime; you have to service that friendship if you want it to endure.

Friendships are usually between two people. More than two-person friendships are unusual and difficult. An example is a two-couple friendship. When there are four people involved instead of two, the number of relationships multiplies from one to six. In addition to the two husband-wife

relationships, there is a relationship between the two men, the two women, and the two opposite spouses, making six relationships to be developed and maintained. That's why group friendships are very unusual. Most groups are made up of many two-person friendships coming together in a group. The real friendships are between the pairs rather than the entire group together.

Some people develop friendships more easily than others. We may think that personality has a lot to do with it — that extroverts who are very outgoing would have the most friends. But in reality it seems that it is based upon a combination of skill, previous experience, and circumstance. Virtually anyone can learn to be a friend.

But just choosing to be a friend is not all there is to it, for we cannot impose our friendship upon other people. Friendships must be mutual. I know that from experience and probably you do as well. There have been times when I have chosen some-

one to be my friend who didn't chose me in return and the friendship never developed. I have also sensed at times that someone has chosen me but I didn't feel comfortable with

that relationship. While you want to be friendly and maintain an acquaintance, a mutual interest must be present in order for a mutual friendship to be developed.

But that is not to say that all friendships are necessarily equal, in fact, most are not. Surveys show that when people list their "best friends," they are often not named as "best friend" in return. The person you name may list some third person as their "best friend."

In any case, those who seek friends should take the initiative. There is truth to the old adage, "to have a friend, be a friend;" that is, if you want to have friends then you ought to be friendly. Those who criticize the community, church, or club for lack of friendliness seldom make friends. There are many people, probably the majority of our population, who want friends. If we will take the initiative toward them or respond to the initiative from them, we will find the kind of friendship that will serve us both well as a gift from God.

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However, friendships can be fragile. They can be broken or disrupted by the major transition points in our lives. You may have long and cherished friendships in the community in which you live, but then because of a job transfer, you go to another community, maybe all the way across the nation or around the world, and you find that that which you almost took for granted is almost impossible to replace. The same thing happens with divorce. Once you were perceived to be part of a couple, but now you are perceived quite differently. When a loved one dies you not only lose that relationship, but also all your relationships seem to change. This can be very painful, especially for those in mid-life or older, because new friendships may take a long time to develop. They may never measure up to past experience or present expectation.

Patterns for building friendships often change as we age. The young do so on something of a level playing field for everyone is building relationships in youth. But as we grow older into middle age and senior adulthood, we discover that then when we reach out to make friendships the playing field is no longer equal. Others already have their friends. It's not that they are unfriendly, but they have all the relationships that they can maintain and it is not until one of their relationships is broken that they will strike up a new one. We must wait for a vacancy or find someone with a vacancy when seeking a new friend.

Well, if these are the realities of the human side of friendship, what are we to do? I'll tell you what I think we ought do as Christians, and that is to attempt to restore the divine design in the midst of the human realities. Our Christian approach should be to grab hold of God's gift of friendship and demonstrate it in the world in which we live.

Let me finish with three simple suggestions. First, value God's gift of friendship. Don't put it down nor speak lightly of the gift of friendship, but count it to be something that God has genuinely and wonderfully given to us. Second, make friends with God. He is the best friend of all, and once we have the best of relationships with God as our friend, that then permeates our relationships with one another. Third, be a faithful friend to others.

It is all summed up in the words of an old

hymn:

Blessed be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love!
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

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