

Friends – Making and Keeping Them

This week in two different distant cities, I will spend time with different men who have been my friends for most of my life.

Rich and I first met in ninth grade English class. We were both from small towns that sent students to a regional high school. He was the athlete on the football team. I wasn't in that circle, I was a member of the debate team and at first it seemed Rich and I really didn't have a lot in common; but then we talked and worked on a project together and became acquainted. We discovered we had a common faith in Jesus Christ. Our friendship built and grew. We used to sit together for lunch in the school cafeteria.

As the years went by, Rich married someone that Charleen and I had grown up with and known all of our lives. In fact, they were married just a few weeks before we were at the same church. Attending different colleges and living thousands of miles apart, we lost track of each other. And then about 20 years later, at a conference in Pennsylvania, of all things, we sat next to each other. I didn't recognize him at first, but then as we renewed acquaintances it was like we were teenagers again. It was a renewal of a friendship that was built long before. He had also become a pastor in the intervening years. Eight years ago, he moved to Roseville, Minnesota. Rich and I are friends.

Terry and I were classmates in graduate school in Denver. We studied together and became friends as couples as well as individuals. We lived in the same apartment building, we spent a lot of social time together and after graduation we were determined we would not lose track of each other, that we would stay in touch — and we did. As we begin to have children we traveled to different parts of the country and introduced our young children to each other. But then time and distance started to drive a wedge between us. I made something of a resolve that I kept I think every couple of years, maybe every third year, that I would try and track him down. I would find some mutual acquaintance and ask where Terry was. I

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sent letters. The correspondence never came back, but never was answered. Until last year. Last year, Terry wrote a long letter. A letter that tried to catch up with all that had happened in between. And the letter was followed by a lengthy phone conversation. All four of us got on the phone and we talked and talked and talked. And now this Saturday we will be together again in Denver. Terry is my friend.

With Jack, the story is different; he was my boss and my mentor. He is a half-generation older than I. When we first met, he treated me with dignity and respect. He treated me as an equal and a friend. He challenged me and encouraged me. Sometimes we would spend all day long together and then get on the telephone and talk for hours at night — sometimes in argument, sometimes just telling stories back and forth. When he resigned, I succeeded him in what became my first full time job. When his family moved from Colorado to Illinois I drove the truck that moved their household goods and helped them get settled in suburban Chicago. We kept in touch. We saw each other often. And we talked on the telephone through the years. As an example, a few months ago I was delayed several hours at O'Hare Airport in Chicago and I called him at work. He came over and we had dinner and he spent time with me. Jack retires this week from an executive position he has held since 1969. There will be a grand retirement dinner for him this Saturday evening and I have been invited to be a speaker.

I am honored and I will be there because Jack is my friend.

I value my friends more than words can tell. Some of them I see often; some of them I see only occasionally. Some are very near and some are far too distant. For all of us, our lives have become far too busy. None of us has a lot of time, but somehow that doesn't seem to matter. For even if there is a long break in communication, when we get back together again there is that common bond of friendship.

I don't think I have a good definition of what a friend is, but I know the feeling. I know the relationship and I recognize it whether it's my friendship or when I see it between two other people. Friends are those with whom I can be myself. I know they will accept me and love me, no matter what or where. They are my friends.

I consider myself to be blessed. Henry Brooks Adams wrote a century ago, "One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible."

Friendships are among the most important relationships of life. They dare not be discounted. Books are written about how to find and keep friends. Friends and friendships mark one of the longest sections in the index of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

Friendship is a rare and valuable thing. The writer of Proverbs 18:24 understands that:

*A man of many companions may come to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*

Companions are the pool of acquaintances out of which friendships are drawn. They are from the people we work with or see in the neighborhood. They are the contacts that are part of our life — the people we know by name. But the point of Proverbs 18:24 is that "many companions" are not enough. A friend is different. A friend is someone who sticks closer than a brother. In fact, a friend may be closer to you than a sister or brother. A friend is like a member of the family — maybe even better.

Friends are more valuable than possessions or a career. Ask anyone who has enormous possessions and no friends and that person will tell you that loneliness comes at too high a price. There are some who even try to use their wealth to buy friends. Contrast that to someone with very little in terms of material possessions but she has a close, trusted friend. If wise, she will tell you that she would not sell her friend for a million dollars.

All of this is to say that a few friends are a lot and that friendships should be treated with the greatest care and the greatest nurturing. But in order to get that friendship and in order to keep that friendship, it is important to understand that friend-

ship is something more given than gotten.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The only way to have a friend is to be one." Actually that is based upon a profoundly Christian principle, the words of Jesus in Acts 20:35, that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." That is a powerful and profound principle for personal finances, but it's also a powerful and profound principle for the friendships of life.

If we have a friendship that is primarily based upon our desire to get something from the other person, that will undermine that relationship. But if a friendship is a relationship where we seek significantly to give, we discover a blessing in that giving that we otherwise would never have known.

If you want to have friends, look for someone who needs a friend. We must look for someone who has a need that is greater than our own, someone who has problems, someone who needs help. Even if I am at a point in life where it seems like I'm drained out and all I can do is take in, the com-

mon advice is, "What you really need to do is to give to someone else." I balk at that type of advice, but there is truth to

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it. For it's in giving away the little that we have that we gain far more, and it's in cultivating friendships with other people that we connect to them. So find someone else who is hurting, someone else who is lonely, someone else who is friendless.

Within the context of church life there is a common thing that can happen. People will come to a church looking to get connected to other people. Initially the people at the church seem very friendly, but it is difficult to make meaningful relationships. It's as though they really don't have the time and energy for you that they have for their other friends. There is a principle operating here that I think is important to understand.

Let me illustrate with some toys! You all are familiar with Lego toys — the little blocks that you snap together to build houses or cars or even a church building. Usually you start with a base piece that has a lot of snap-on points and from that you build so that you put a piece that snaps here, a piece that snaps there until you have built a whole structure. Now, if you're the last piece and you want to

be part of the structure, where do you think the best place to connect would be? It's not in the base piece that is all snapped up. To find the spaces that are open, find those pieces that have connecting points that are available.

So it is with finding friends. You see, there are some of us who have a capacity to have six good friendships, although that is really rare. There are some that are even able to maintain eight, but most of us actually are more in the category of about four. The longer a person has lived in a community or attended a church or been enrolled at a school or worked at a company, the more likely that person will be all "snapped up." It doesn't mean they don't like you or that they don't care. It's just that they don't have any vacant snap-on points left.

So what's a lonely person to do? Find those people who have snap-on points available. What's a newcomer to do? Find others who are also new to the community or new to the church, people that aren't all snapped up with established relationships that go on for years. Perhaps you've recently gone through a broken relationship that has unsnapped a lot of previous friendships. Look for others in your situation. You see, there is no shortage of people who are lonely, who have needs and are looking for friends. And those who are willing to give more than they get will quickly find their generosity and friendship warmly welcomed.

This is precisely what Jesus did when he made friends. It wasn't with the popular or the powerful. He befriended sinners, tax collectors, people with diseases and disabilities that made them outcasts, people who had ethnic and racial backgrounds that made them unacceptable to the mainstream. It was to those that Jesus gave; and so, Jesus had many friends.

Once a friend is found, friendship requires time and effort. Jesus is a powerful example of that. Did you know that if you count the public years of Jesus, from his biography in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it covers three and one half years on the calendar, but if you go through and read every page in the New Testament and count the number of days

on which we have information, the total numbers about 34? Out of more than one thousand days, we only know where Jesus was and what he was doing for 34 of them. What was he doing the rest of the time? He was spending the rest of his time with his friends.

It's true that he was training them to take the good news of God's salvation to all of the world, but he was also building relationships with his friends because he counted friendships and relationships to be important. The amount of time he spent with them proves the priority he gave to relationships and friendships.

We need to ask ourselves how much time and effort we give to the friendships we have and to meeting the needs of others. Think for a moment of two or three people you would count to be friends or people you would like to have for friends. When was the last time you were together with them? Do you pray for them? What are some of their needs that you can help out and meet? What could you do over a period of a year or a period of five years to build and strengthen that relationship - to invest in someone else? Think of those specific people — picture them in your mind — and ask, are you primarily focused on what you can get from them or are you primarily focused on what you can do for them?

I am always fascinated by people and all the things we as people do. When it comes to giving time and effort to friends, I have been most impressed by someone I have watched for a long time and that is my mother-in-law, Charleen's mother. I see her as someone who in my experience is virtually unparalleled in investing her life in other people. She is in her 80's. She is always looking for people she can help. She is a prolific note writer, she makes daily telephone calls asking people what their needs are and how she may be able to help them and she has a prayer list that is like a small city phone book. I think that she prays more diligently and more effectively than anyone I know.

You may not know that Charleen's father died about two months ago — just eight weeks after he

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was first diagnosed with cancer. Her parents had dated for a long time before they were married and then they were married for 54 years. So she is now in the earliest stages of profound grief.

I've been impressed watching this woman. I have been impressed by her strong faith in Jesus Christ through a great trial. I was impressed by the stunning number of people who came to the funeral. People that I had never heard of or knew nothing about. People from every walk of life. People going back for almost 80 years — the fruit of a lifetime of time and effort for others.

But I have been most impressed by the way she has filled her life over the past couple of months in love and service to other people in need. She regularly volunteers to drive people to church that could not otherwise get a ride. She offers to take people to the hospital for treatments or to visit their relatives or friends that are there. Think how easy and natural it would have been for her to withdraw into her sorrow. Instead, she has given herself to meet the needs and to chase away the sorrows of other people.

It is a great principle for us all — that friendship requires time and effort. But when friendships are valued — when we truly desire to give more than to get, when we invest time and effort into other people — the result is something that is indescribably wonderful. It is a friendship that is not easily shaken.

Proverbs 17:17 says that “a friend loves at all times.” Friends are those who love us whether we are rich or poor, young or old, powerful or weak, proud or humble. Proverbs 27:6 tells us that “wounds from a friend can be trusted.” A friend who loves you at all times is someone who can criticize and correct you and say things that no one else would ever say, but you know it's okay because he or she is someone you can trust.

A friend is someone that cares so much about you, loves you so fully and completely, that anything she says or whatever he does will always be intended for your good and never for harm.

What do you think of yourself as a friend? Are you the kind of friend that you would like to have for a friend? I know that one of the painful parts of friendship is that we can get hurt and be disappointed. We tend to set up such high expectations

of other people and then to be so disappointed when they do not meet the expectations set for them. It is a difficult thing to be the kind of friend to others that we would like to be.

But did you know there is a friend who never disappoints — who meets the highest standard of friendship that there is? In the words of the New Testament in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” The astonishing good news of God is that Jesus is the kind of friend who not only said he loved us, but he actually died on the cross to save us from sin and hell. He put down his life to be our friend. He, the Son of God, chased our sins away and let us escape from hell to guarantee us eternity in heaven. That is the kind of friend that Jesus is.

I encourage you to be a Christian friend to others. To value friendship, for it is a rare and wonderful thing. To give more than you desire to get. To put in the time and the effort to build a friendship that is strong and lasts and is good.

But most of all, I encourage you to have the best friend of all and that is Jesus. His friendship in some ways is so different than others, but yet, also much the same. Through prayer we can talk to him as to a friend. We can tell him that we want him to be our best friend. We can thank him for giving his life for our friendship and salvation and tell him that we receive him as a friend and as our Savior and Lord. Be sure to make friends with Jesus because he is the very best friend anyone could ever have.

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