

How to be a Friend¹

We come today to our final sermon on friendship. I'd like to talk a little on things you and I can do to strike up, enhance, and maybe save a friendship. As I was putting this together, I was thinking that it doesn't sound or feel real spiritual or theological.

Have you ever noticed that the actual living of the Christian life or the life Jesus guides us into often doesn't seem particularly "Christian?" There's a mystery here. Often the more you and I live out our calling, the more ordinary or common place those activities seem.

Take an immediate example. There are two habitat houses in the making in LaGrange. One is being built by this church; the other, by our local Lions Club. I'm thinking that a church-built habitat house appears to be no different than any other. Somehow Jesus Christ is present in the motivations and the generosity of the church members, and in all probability, the Lions too. It's simply a mystery how Jesus inhabits or inspires or uses these efforts.

I've told stories about working for Princeton Seminary, which entailed picking up trash from the dorms. As a trash man, I can report that students would throw away their notes sometimes immediately after finishing a class. One day, the trash guys were going through notes from the classes of some of the leading theologians. I found a notebook from Dr. Charles West's class on Christian ethics. The student had written on the first page the first thing Dr. West told them. Here's the sentence: "There's nothing particularly Christian about Christian ethics."

So, as I talk about friendship, it may seem that any sociologist, or psychologist, or even sociable person could say these words. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that in all friendships, both within and outside the church, you and I are fulfilling our calling as disciples. And somehow, just as Jesus was fully human and fully divine, so are our efforts to reach out and love one another—fully human and fully divine.

So, once again, I'm asking myself and each of us to launch one new friendship—because we are disciples and Jesus is our friend.

How can we make and keep a friendship? First, we can be friends on purpose. My tendency is to just assume that friendships will happen on their own with no effort. Sometimes they do. But to put forth even a small amount of effort makes a huge difference. About 10-12 years ago, I said to another Presbyterian minister, "I'd like to spend time with you just talking and supporting each other—having a good time. He was delighted to agree with that. I said it again to another friend. Then another. Within about a year, I had all the friends I had time to devote to.

Friendships are one of the great joys of life. To be blatant about seeking friends is a loving act and to share ourselves is a gift of love.

Being intentional about friendship carries through to all aspects of a relationship—calling and visiting in a regular, responsible way. Putting forth the effort to listen, remember birthdays and special days, to be helpful and generous. The old adage that the best way to have a friends is to be a friends, is deeply true.

¹This sermon was preached by Douglas DeCelle at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, Georgia on January 27, 2008.

A second dimension of friendship is intimacy, which I'd like to call hospitality of the heart. Most of us are pretty good at welcoming guests into our houses for meals or parties or conversation.

Transfer your hospitality skills to the way that you talk with a friend. In other words, ask what it would be like to invite a friend into your heart or inner world with the same kind of generosity you invite people into your homes. Sometimes guests are a bit dull or have obnoxious opinions or are unmannerly in some way. That's okay. When someone is our guest we accept them into our homes and hearts just as they are.

The analogy extends to other aspects of being close to another person. When we invite friends over to the house, we reveal some of our less presentable rooms or living habits. Maybe the garage, basement, or kids' bedrooms are a mess. That's okay. Friends know about our messy basement. They're not passing judgments. When we talk hospitably to friends we reveal that our lives are messy or disheveled in some ways.

When we have friends over to the house, we accept them just as they are; we don't try to correct their table manners or political opinions.

The same is true of hospitality of the heart. When people talk to us we give them space and acceptance to be just as they are. When they're with us, they're comfortable.

In the home where I spent my early childhood, my parents had hung in the family room a wooden plaque with this poem printed on it:

Guest: You are welcome here be at your ease
Get up when you're ready; go to bed when you please
Happy to share with you such as we've got
The leaks in the roof, the soup in the pot.
You don't have to thank us, or laugh at our jokes.
Sit deep and come often, you're one of the folks.

What I'm trying to say is that friendship is an intimacy that is like hospitality. If we can talk with our friends in such a way that accepts them just as they are and reveals ourselves to them just as we are; if we can kick our mental shoes off and sit back, we will have perfectly grasped this point.

My third point is to give friendship time. Researchers are saying that a good friendship takes about three years to ripen into a potentially life-long grace.

There's so much phoniness in our commercialized friendliness. M. Scott Peck laments the distortion of friendship as represented by a full page Dun and Bradstreet ad in USA Today a while back. (Dun and Bradstreet rates the financial stability of companies.) Anyway, the ad read:

I'm 30,000 feet over Nebraska and the guy next to me sounds like a prospect

I figure I'll buy him a drink, but first I excuse myself and go to the phone.

I call D and B (Dun and Bradstreet) for his company's credit rating. Three minutes later I'm back in my seat buying a beer for my new best friend.

Enough said about the need for patience and depth in friendship.

Finally, let's not let hurt have the final word. The blunt truth is that the closer you and I get to others the higher the risk of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and conflict.

It's on this point that Christian faith is unequivocal. Forgiveness and reconciliation are always called for. Think of the extreme that God has gone through to insure that you and I are restored to fellowship with him, through the cost of Jesus' suffering on the cross.

Friendships are intended to be permanent and restored when they are threatened.

This, by the way, goes to one of the spiritual benefits of having and being friends. We learn how to forgive and relate with one another.

You know, I believe that the emphasis, which God places on reconciliation is a great clue to what's really important in life. He's saying, "Don't lose love. Don't lose friends, don't lose one another."

Indeed, the whole course of our discipleship parallels what we are talking about. Jesus was intentional in approaching and inviting you and me into his company. He takes us hospitably into his heart as we take him into ours. He sticks with us patiently and permanently, and he gives all to win us back—his friends forever.