

May 6, 2018
John 15:13-17
Friendship
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¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. *Words of God for the People of God. Let us Pray. The grass withers and flowers fade, O Lord but words from you stand forever. Amen.*

Who *are* your true friends? What does friendship mean to you? What does friendship mean to God? What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus? What does it mean to *be* a true friend?

Horror gripped the heart of a World War-I soldier, as he saw *his* lifelong friend fall in battle.

The soldier asked his Lieutenant if he could go out into no man’s land to bring his fallen comrade back... “You can go,” said the Lieutenant, “but I don’t think it will be worth it. Your friend is probably dead and you may throw *your* life away.” The Lieutenant’s words didn’t matter, and the soldier went anyway. Miraculously, he managed to reach his friend, hoisted him onto his shoulder and brought him back to their company’s trench. The officer checked the wounded soldier, then looked at his friend who now was also seriously wounded and bleeding badly.

“I told you it wouldn’t be worth it,” said the lieutenant. “Your friend is dead and now you are badly wounded and may die too.”

“It *was* worth it, Sir,” said the soldier.

“What do you mean it was worth it?” responded the Lieutenant.” Your friend is dead.””

“Yes Sir,” the soldier answered, “but it was worth it because when I got to him, he was still alive and I had the joy of hearing him say..... “Man...I knew you would come!” (pause)

How many of us would be willing to save the life of a friend while giving up our own? That is what Jesus did and he invites us into that kind of love. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friend”.

Think for a moment. Is there anyone in your life other than family that you might be willing to die for? If you cannot answer a “yes” to this question then you are missing out on the kind of love, the kind of friendship to which Jesus is inviting you – the kind that was demonstrated by

that soldier on the battlefield. I am talking about a love so deep, that you would not have to think twice about putting yourself in harm's way – even if it meant only having one last word with that friend.

Who are your true friends? What does friendship mean to you? What does friendship mean to God? What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus? What does it mean to be a true friend?

True friendship between two individuals enriches both beyond measure. It gives each insight into the life of the other in such a way that it reflects back and forth the beauty of the deep humanity and deep divinity present in the other. A solid friendship enables you to realize that in the presence of your friend your secrets as well as your sins are sacred. Friendship is not just an antidote for boredom and loneliness. True friendship with another, is, in a sense, friendship with a part of God – friendship with a part of God born witness by the two human beings who share it. (short pause)

Unfortunately this technologically advanced culture in which we live today – the U.S. – does not value friendship. Among the democratic countries of the world today, we in the U.S. have the highest incidence of serious abuses in drugs and the high incidences of people perpetrating violence to themselves or others in the form of suicide and mass killings than any other place in the world. And both can be traced directly back to a single factor: the lack of loving connections that are able to transcend politics and even religion.

We actually live in a culture that is much better at identifying enemies than it is at nurturing real friendship. With the ability to tweet our thoughts out for the whole world to see any time of the day or night, we are yet among the loneliest who have ever lived – many now growing up literally not knowing what it is to have a real friend.

And when I say “friend”, I am not talking about an affinity for someone who shares a liking for the same kinds of people and politics as us and more to the point, these days, someone who hates the same people and politics as us – but someone with whom there is a genuine connection based on something deeper – a real appreciation of the other. (pause)

Who are *your* true friends? What do those friendships mean to you? What do those friendships mean to God? What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus? Who do you know that appears friendless?

In the September 2017 issue of the Atlantic, Journalist Jean Twenge wrote a sobering article about the unprecedented loneliness of what she calls the igen generation – those born between 1995 and 2015 – the first generation to grow up with smartphones, have an Instagram account before they start high school, and who cannot remember a time before the internet.

The article features the results of numerous studies on these children and young people along with an interview with someone typical of this age group, a girl named Athena, a 13-year-old who lives in Houston, Texas, who's had an iPhone since she was 11.

When contacted last August, Athena told Twenge she'd spent most of the summer hanging out alone in her room with her phone. That's just the way her generation is, she said. "We didn't have a choice to know any life without iPads or iPhones. So, I think we like our phones more than we like actual people."

"I've seen my friends with their families—they don't talk to them," Athena told Twenge. "They just say 'Okay, okay, whatever' while they're on their phones. They don't pay attention to their family." And like her peers, Athena is an expert at tuning out her parents so she can focus on her phone. She spent much of her summer keeping up with so called 'friends', but nearly all of it was over text or Snapchat. "I've been on my phone more than I've been with actual people," she said. "My bed has, like, an imprint of my body."

Twenge, alongside her interview with Athena, presents compelling evidence that the twin rise of the smartphone and social media has caused an earthquake of a magnitude we've never seen; the devices we've placed in our young people's hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously lonely and unhappy.

Twenge reports that the number of teens who get together with their friends nearly every day dropped by nearly 50 percent from 2000 to 2015 – with most of that decline coming most recently. Kids today are much safer than they have been but it is because they are rarely outside the purview of their parents for very long with little complaint as long as they have a phone in their hands. So it's not only a matter of fewer kids partying; fewer kids are spending time simply hanging out at all which is something all teens used to do: nerds and jocks, poor kids and rich kids, C students and A students. The roller rink, the basketball court, the town pool, the local necking spot—they've all been replaced by virtual spaces accessed through apps and the web.

The result?: survey after survey reveals that teens who spend most of their leisure time on screen activities (which by the way are the majority of teens these days) are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more leisure time on nonscreen activities – especially if it is with other people – are more likely to be happy.

Social-networking sites like Facebook promise to connect us to friends. But the portrait of iGen teens emerging from the data is one of a lonely, practically friendless, completely dislocated generation. And for the first time ever, suicides now far outnumber homicides among the young in the United States. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/> retrieved May 1, 2018.

Lack of authentic, face to face contact leads to loneliness, which leads to depression, which can eventually lead to suicide.

(pause)

Who are your true friends? What does friendship mean to you? What does friendship mean to God? What does it mean to be a friend of Jesus? What does it mean today, right now, to be a true friend?

There are people all around us shriveling from lack of real human connections much less true sacrificial friendship. I hope you hear this today loud and clear: Extending an offer of friendship with Christ by simply getting someone to come to worship with you might not just give you the opportunity to eventually experience the type sacrificial friendship demonstrated by Jesus and the WWI soldier: It could just save that person's life. At the very least it could be transformative. Today, your offer of friendship can help change the world because the thing is: one can't be around someone like you, connected to the author of love himself – someone who really cares about them for very long without it having an effect. And that effect usually involves unexpected ripples. Friendship transcends, trumps and changes everything.

Consider the story of Jesse Owens, the African-American track and field star who – to the dismay of Adolf Hitler – won four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The 2016 film, “Race” starring Stephan James, chronicles his rise to world renown. What the movie hints at but is not so well-known is the friendship Owens developed with Luz Long, one of the German athletes competing against him in the long jump.

Long, touted by Hitler and the Nazi regime as a prime example of the new Aryan man, was favored to win the event, and had in fact already broken the Olympic record in one of the qualifying rounds. But then in a gesture of fair play, during the long jump event, Long advised Owens on he might improve his technique.

With that advice Owens defeated him in the final round, edging him out for the gold medal. Afterwards, the two took off, arm in arm, to run a lap of honor around the stadium, under the very eyes of the disgruntled Hitler and the Nazi officials.

Hitler subsequently left the stadium in a huff refusing to shake Owen's hand claiming that traffic was so bad that he had to leave early. But of Luz Long, Owens would later remark: “It took a lot of courage for him to express his friendship to me in front of Hitler.... You can win all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't even be a plating on the 24-carat friendship I felt for Long at that moment. Hitler must have gone crazy watching us embrace victoriously.”

Long went on to serve in the Wehrmacht during World War II, reaching the rank of Senior Lance Corporal. He was killed during the Allied invasion of Sicily on July 14, 1943. Long and Owens had corresponded after the 1936 games and in his last letter, Long wrote to Owens asking him to contact his son after the war and tell him about his father and “what times were like when we were not separated by war. I am saying—tell him how things can be between men on this earth”. After the war, Owens travelled to Germany to meet Luz's son. Owens then later served as best man at Kai Long's wedding. [Larry Schwartz, "Owens pierced a myth," <http://espn.go.com/sportscentury/features/00016393.html>. Retrieved February 8, 2012].

Who do you know who is friendless and alone? If you can't think of anyone then I hate to tell you but you may be cashing in on your white middle class privilege that gives you the luxury of living separated from the lonely and disenfranchised. Because, believe me, there are plenty out there in the dangerous wilderness that has become our culture.

And the fact is, out of our *friendship with* Jesus and one another, *we* are called to become *friendmakers for God*.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury puts it this way: “There are a lot of definitions of what it is to be a minister or a priest in the name of Christ, but one that has struck me with great force recently is this: A minister, a priest is someone who in his or her friendship reveals to me the face of God.... To be a kingdom of ministers, a kingdom of priests, then, is to be a people through whose friendship God can be seen. Are we friends to God’s world? We shall be so if we learn to be friends of Jesus Christ and friends with one another. But it may then be that we are able to be true priests in sharing that face with the world... the face of the one who has called us, and loved us, and pledged himself to us, and lives and works and prays in our midst, Christ himself.

That is the calling of a priestly people; the kingdom of priests, the holy nation, the calling given to God’s people from the beginning.... Friendship in and for Christ. What greater calling can there be? May Christ then be visible among us through our friendship. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, Sermon preached at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Armagh, Ireland, February 22, 2005. ireland.anglican.org/news/342. Retrieved December 1, 2011.

The work of Christian hospitality is more important today than ever before. And hospitality is about connecting people to the community of faith in a deep and meaningful way. When people become part of a church they begin to develop relationships. Their number of confidants begins to increase. Their loneliness is replaced by friendship and they do not feel quite so isolated. They make connections with people in ways they have not experienced before. Again, Christian hospitality is not just a good idea – these days it’s a matter of life and death. Henry G. Brinton, *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 66-67.

Dostoyevsky said that one of the greatest tragedies is that so many people live their lives without ever finding themselves *in* themselves. This is what a friendship gives us. The real mirror of your life and soul is your true friend. A friend helps you to glimpse who you really are and what you are doing here.

Similarly, the Celts had a refined and beautiful notion of friendship. In the early Celtic church, a person who acted as a teacher, companion or spiritual guide was called an *anam cara*, the Gaelic words for “soul friend.” The *anam cara* was the person to whom one confessed, revealing confidential aspects of one’s life, one’s mind and one’s heart. This person had a special intimacy with you, and your friendship was an act of primal recognition. It cut across all barriers of convention, morality and religion. The *anam cara* could see you from an eternal perspective. John O’Donohue, “Soul to Soul,” *Utne Reader*, November-December 1997, 33.

That is what Christ has done for us through our connection with his church. It is what we are called to do in his name – seek out people for whom we can become *anam cara* – soul friends.

So what are we waiting for? Let’s get to work. I look forward to seeing who each of you will bring with you to worship in the coming weeks.

Let us pray. Gracious God, help us to access your friendship so that even as we enjoy our current friendships in you, we are given the energy, imagination and love to shake us out of our places of security in order to offer friendship; give us the courage, just as you had the courage, to befriend the friendless even though it may be costly.

And now bless these gifts that they may enrich our current friendships even as they allow us to begin new ones with those we may not even have met yet. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.