

Friends of Jesus

John 15:9-17

We crave connection. We were created to be connected with others. We were created for friendship and family. And yet we find it difficult to do so. It's hard to make friends. It's hard to keep friends. It's hard to be connected with each other.

One of the biggest challenges of the past year plus has been the isolation and the disconnectedness. Things we took for granted a year ago has been much more difficult this year. Virtual meetings allow us to stay connected, but not in the same way. Even seeing someone in person makes it difficult to recognize or talk sometimes when both are masked up. Even as more people are getting vaccinated and we're able to get together more,

That challenge isn't new, though. We may have lots of Facebook friends, or followers on Instagram or Twitter, but we don't have a lot of close friends. Recent studies show that people have fewer close friends. One study from a few years ago found that the average American only has one close confidante, and some don't have any. There's a joke that goes around clergy circles that says the greatest miracle Jesus ever did wasn't raising Lazarus or feeding the 5000 or calming the storm. The greatest miracle Jesus did was to have twelve close friends in his thirties.

But since we've heard for the last year that the danger is other people, it's harder to get together with others. As in many things, the pandemic and our response to it didn't always create new trends. It merely accelerated trends that were already there.

Sin's greatest power is to separate. It separates us from God and it separates us from each

other. Sin seeks to divide us, to make us fight among ourselves, to have us divide the world into "us" and "them." Jesus came not to separate, but to join together. Jesus came not to divide, but to unite. Jesus came to overcome the divisions caused by sin. Jesus came to end the separation between God and humanity.

The greatest sign of love is to be willing to give up your life for your friends. We've all heard countless stories of soldiers or sailors who laid down their lives to save others. Jesus gave his life for us. Jesus gave his life for us even when we were enemies because of sin. But because of what Jesus did, now we are friends.

That new life of friendship and connection begins at Baptism, when our sins are washed away by water and the Word, and the Holy Spirit gives us faith and trust in Jesus and all that He has done for us. We don't deserve that friendship. We don't deserve that new life. The friendship is only possible because of Jesus' choice.

Being friends of Jesus doesn't just connect us to Jesus, though. It connects us to others. Just as you make other friends through your original friends' social circles, so we are connected to one another. God created us for community. We depend on other people. Not only do we need friends and family to love us and keep us company, but we also need them to help us resist temptation and overcome sin.

Other groups know that we need others in our lives to help us. That's why organizations like Weight Watchers work, because you have people who are helping you stay accountable. AA works the same way, knowing that you can't get over your addiction on your own.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together*, views friendships like this. The central issue everyone in Christian community will face is this: will you view your fellow friend in the eyes of God, and therefore in God's image, or in your own eyes, and try to form them in your image?

In Christ, our relationships work on two levels; the vertical and the horizontal. The vertical dimension of divine connection is the relationship between us and God. The horizontal dimension of human connection is between us and other people. God created us to need both levels of connection. And only through a friendship with Jesus can you have these connections.

How do you stay connected with your friends? If you're like me, the answer may be, "Not well." But the answer relies on time and communication. It takes time to maintain friendships. It also takes communication. It takes talking back and forth, listening. That communicating may take place on social media, or zoom, or over the phone, or even through the mail. But it needs to take place.

We stay connected to our friend Jesus in the same way. We stay connected to Jesus by spending time with him, in prayer, reading our Bibles, doing Bible studies, listening to music that points us to God and uses God's word. It takes communication, talking to God in prayer and listening to God's Word.

Being connected with Jesus, being friends with Jesus, can help us stay better connected with our friends, and being better connected with friends can help us stay better connected to Jesus. Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life in July 2020 demonstrates this. It found that 72 percent of

Christians reported talking on the phone or by video at least weekly to friends or family, as did 73 percent of Jews, while only 65 percent of unaffiliated Americans reported doing so, and only 61 percent of atheists did. Religious people were also more likely to have helped friends or neighbors during the pandemic and donated to charitable organizations. Friendships help encourage more friendships.

Friendship is build best over meals, which has also been a challenge this past year. But that's part of why we join together in the special meal of Holy Communion. It not only brings us closer to God. It brings us closer to each other, as well. It creates and strengthens the community of believers and the connection to God.

Friendship also grows best when we share our fears and vulnerabilities, when we are open and honest with each other. We may sometimes be afraid to be open and honest with God, instead trying to hide from Him. But with Jesus as our friend, we have a friend with whom we can be open and honest without fear. He listens to our confessions and our prayers, and forgives us and loves us.

The pandemic has made us change how we get together. It's even made us change if we even get together. As we wait for the restrictions to end and the pandemic to be over, we rejoice that we are able to friends of Jesus because Jesus has ended the separations caused by sin and opened the way for us to be with God forever. What a wonderful promise.

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