

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Encouragement Along the Way: Scripture
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Genesis 2:15-23; John 15:12-17

Making friends is a basic life skill. We begin practicing before we can walk. But if I were to ask you “how does a person make a friend?” we would all have a hard time coming up with a solid answer. On my first day of kindergarten I was nervous about making friends. I don’t know how I had made the friends I already had but I was pretty sure my mom would remember and tell me how friending works. She told me all I had to do was walk up to someone and ask them to be my friend. Simple enough; at five I was unaware what rejection was and trusted my mom wouldn’t give me bad advice. Her advice actually served me well. I am still very close to two people I met that day.

But then 13 years later when I walked onto Michigan State University’s campus I panicked again. I had no idea how to make friends. Then it happened again when I walked off campus a few years later years later. If you put me in a new community today I would probably have the same panic attack. How have I gotten this far in life, with a lot of friends and friending experience, without a solid strategy on how to make friends?

There seems to be no wrong way to make a friend, thankfully. I have made friends during times of joy and times of grief. I have made friends because I was locked in buildings with them, aka school. Being an extrovert, I admit I have imposed my friendship on unsuspecting introverts. With so many different ways it is hard to give a straight answer to how to make a friend.

Carnegie tried to teach friend-making strategy in his book “How To Win friends and Influence People.” It did well in its time but today most people recognize his strategy as disingenuous at best and manipulative at worst.

As difficult as making friends can be it is essential to our happiness. A study from my alma matter found that friendships are more important than family relationships when it comes to our mental health. Psychologists think this is because we tend to do more leisurely activities with friends while family time can be more monotonous. The study does recognize that people do have deep friendships with family members so their conclusion was that the more support a person has the stronger their mental health tends to be.

The idea that humans need other humans is not a new revelation. It’s Biblical, a Genesis 2 fundamental. The first problem ever to exist in the world is not sin: it’s isolation. Adam is in the garden alone. God sends every animal to Adam to be named but God also hopes Adam will pick one to become a friend. Not even the dog wins the part. God has to go back to the drawing board and come up with a better creature than anything already made. At this point, God has a lot of creating experience, and the woman does not disappoint. Adam finally has a friend. He no longer has to be alone.

Isolation is a major problem in God’s eye. We are not meant to be separated, we are meant to be in relationships, we are meant to be in friendships.

Jesus knew the importance of friendship. His first ministry act was to gather his support network and calls the disciples. In the Gospel of John, as Jesus prepares for the cross he talks to the disciples about friendship. He knows they are about to launch into a new chapter of life and he does not want them to panic about making friends after he is gone. He tells them to look for three markers of a good friend: imitation, information, and initiative.

Imitation is the first marker. Jesus says “You are my friends if you do what I command.” That’s some strong language, I wouldn’t say I command any of my friends although maybe my introverted friends would say that. Command does not feel right in the context of friendship. But what Jesus wants us to understand is that friends want to imitate one another. They have seen the value in another person’s thoughts and needs and want similar things. Jesus is commanding that the

disciples love one another. No one in the room is protesting. No one is throwing their arms up and saying, “Ugh! Jesus, you ask too much.” No, because they are friends they all understand the context of the command and agree it’s a worthy thing to put into action.

Friending requires imitation. Body language specialists say if you are wondering if someone likes you watch their body posture. If you lean back and they lean back, or you cross your arms and then they do, it means they like you and want to appear similar enough to be your friend. When we are someone’s friend, we see something in them that we admire. They inspire us to be the best we can be and by obeying their commands we can become better people.

Of course, there are limits. Boundaries are important to friendships too. “NO” is a command we can use and obey.

Jesus also helps us find our boundaries with the next friend marker, information. Jesus explains that in a master-slave relationship a master makes commands on a slave and withholds information. One half of the relationship knows why a command is being made while the other is supposed to follow without question. If there is a question from the slave they won’t get an answer. This relationship is not a friendship.

Friends keep friends informed. If a command is made and someone asks why, the friend explains why. If someone is uncomfortable with the command, they are free to explain their feelings. Friendships have a free flow of information so that everyone in the relationship can set good boundaries and react autonomously.

The third marker is initiative. Remember the advice my mom gave me in kindergarten? “Ask someone to be your friend” is exactly what Jesus means. But as I read John’s Gospel this week it dawned on me that I have misunderstood when a friendship starts.

I have always thought friendship started when the other person gave their “yes” answer, but in truth, friending begins even before I ask the question. It begins when I decide to be a friend to someone else. It begins when I make the initiative.

In calling the disciples his friends Jesus says “You did not choose me but I chose you.” I chose you is enough, which means that “no” is not a bad thing. The effort made to be friendly is still worth making if we get a “no” response. Jesus simply wants people to be friendly and bear the fruit of love into the world. If we are so crippled by our fear of rejection, love doesn’t stand a chance. This holy work of friending is valuable no matter the other person’s response.

Friending is so important to faith! My personal ministry philosophy is centered on this spiritual practice. It’s controversial but my main goal in the youth group is to create a community. If a youth walks out of here knowing nothing about Jesus but has a friend, knows that these types of buildings are a place where you can make friends, I’m thrilled. Of course, I want them to learn about Jesus and grow in faith, but for some, high school will not be the time period for that kind of growth. Having friends ensures there is always a voice through which God can speak.

Each friend we make holds the potential to bring God’s love to us when we really need it. That’s why initiative is so important in a friendship. If we see a friend in need we should feel empowered to help. The only way we know what they need is by sharing openly about our feelings and needs. When we share that information it helps us put ourselves in someone else’s shoes and imitate their best qualities back to them, until they remember who they are and how much they are loved.

No one is perfect at friending, but the process of being a good friend is a spiritual practice just as much as praying or reading scripture. There will be times when it comes easy, and times when it seems impossible. But just like any other spiritual discipline, we need to keep pushing ourselves to become better friends.

May we be people worth imitating and surround ourselves with people who inspire us to be better. May we be open and honest with the people in our lives. May we find ways to take initiative to make a friend and bear the fruit of love into the world.