

You've Got a Friend Pt. 1, 9/10/23

Did you know that in May of this year the Surgeon General, issued an Advisory alerting us to a health crisis in America? This is a health crisis that causes a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia and premature death by more than 60%? In fact prolonged exposure puts you at the same risk as obesity and smoking nearly a pack a day, it's linked to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and suicide.¹ What is this health crisis according to Dr. Murthy? **Loneliness**. Loneliness has been called by some sociologists "the greatest pathology of our time."² Now we might think that this is just because of the pandemic, but that just exacerbated an already serious problem. Robert Putnam exposed this growing epidemic over 20 years ago in his landmark book in *Bowling Alone*, in his follow-up research he said that over the past 10 years Americans have gone from an average of 3.2 friends to 1.8 friends. That's a 40% loss of friendship. Of course America isn't the only country facing this crisis. Possibly a harbinger of what could come to America with increasing dependence on technology, in South Korea isolation and tech addiction has gotten so bad that this year the government started an initiative that pays reclusive youths aged 9-24 a monthly allowance of \$500 to come out of their house and publicly integrate into society.³ We can be entertained and educated, even watch church, while taking care of our errands, all through our devices and even delivered to our door with zero human interaction. But technology can't take all the blame. Researchers point to the breakdown of the neighborhood bond- a leading indicator is that we replaced a front porch culture with the back deck culture. And certainly the last 30 years we have seen a significant decline in religious, social and civil engagement in society.

What I have been increasingly disturbed by is the cultural undercurrent of individualism and self-sufficiency that has led more and more people, especially young people, not have friends and interdependent relationships and be totally fine with it. In a popular thread online- called **I don't have friends, I don't need friends. I don't feel lonely. Am I alright?** You may assume, that the overwhelming majority of the responses would be "No you are not alright. You should probably work on discovering what's wrong and address it." Instead, the overwhelming majority of responses are positive and cheering this on as some kind of pinnacle of emotional achievement. One response from someone who claims to have a degree in Psychology. "Believe me, if you don't feel lonely & left out from the world for not having friends, in fact, if you have your own "happy space", independent of others presence, this is the best thing." Or this one- "Trust me, try to live your life as alone as you can. Friends will either abandon or leave you to move on with their lives. And what's even worse is when you develop romantic feelings to add extra pain. Getting attached to people is a bad idea because then, when they inevitably get

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>

² <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1207822,00.html>

³ <https://www.insider.com/south-korea-paying-500-dollars-young-people-leave-house-2023>
4#:~:text=South%20Korea%20is%20paying%20%24500,South%20Korea%27s%20family%20ministry%20estimates.

ripped away, you'll feel a part of you has gone with them. You're on the right track, just try and stay with that mindset."⁴

I would guess that there are some of us here that may have a similar perspective on friendships and relationships. Maybe you avoid it because friendship has been hard for you, and produces anxiety and fear so life is just easier without friendship, or maybe you've been burned in the past. Others of us just don't feel like we have time for friendships in busyness of life, statistically often the case with men as they hit their 40s and 50s. I believe a lot of people settle for unsatisfying levels of friendship and through a variety of reasons have determined never to take the risk of working for something more. But the reason almost every September we do a series on relationships is because we believe friendship are vital to becoming the person God intends for us to be. [Title Slide] So don't go it alone. We believe community here at Brandywine is a worthy pursuit despite the risks. So over the next two weeks we hope to encourage all of us to take a next relational step here. For some that may be a first step of connection, for others it may be going deeper and becoming a better friend in your existing relationships. This week we are going to look at the origin and importance of friendship. Next week we are going to talk about how to find and become a great friend.

The Origin of Friendship. You know the Bible had a lot to say about friendship. May people think of the Bible as just a book about old guys with beards and sandals, religion and rules. But actually the Bible is mostly about relationships, did you know that? First and foremost our relationship with God, and then secondly, our relationship with each other. This is why Jesus said the **greatest two commandments are to love God and love one another.** In His last prayer for his disciples in John 17, Jesus said, **"Father, may they be one as we are one."** In other words, one of the primary goals Jesus had in His death and resurrection was to create a diverse community of friends that, in some ways, would resemble the Trinity itself. The doctrine of the Trinity—that God exists eternally as one being in 3 persons—means that God has existed, eternally, as a community of friends, this is what the **symbol of the trinity** attempts to capture. One of the distinctions of Christianity is that we have a relational God who has been dwelling in perfect friendship for all eternity. He created us not because He was lonely and needed us, but so that we would have the privilege in sharing and experiencing the perfect friendship with Him. So, when we experience friendship, we are experiencing a dimension of God, and, on the flipside, to be isolated without friends is to be very unlike God and how He created us to be. In fact, you remember the first time "not good" is used in the Bible? Genesis 2:18, It's when God looks at man and says, **"It is not good that man should be alone."**⁵ One of the primary goals of Jesus' work on the cross was the restoration of vital friendship with each other and with God. **Ephesians 2 ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.** Friendships are what we were created for and it is our ultimate destiny forever for those who enter a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

⁴ <https://www.quora.com/I-dont-have-friends-I-dont-need-friends-I-dont-feel-lonely-Am-I-alright>

⁵ Thanks to JD Greear for some of the language and ideas in this section. Sermon: Still Standing, Friends-R-Us

So now that we've briefly discussed the Origins of Friendship, let's discuss **the importance of friendship**. And we could go lots of places to talk about friendship, but I'd like to anchor our time mostly in Proverbs which is filled with great friendship truth and advice. So let's look at **3 Reasons to Pursue Friendship**

1. Friends Form Us. Proverbs 13:20 *He who walks with the wise becomes wise; but the friend of fools suffers harm.* We see in this verse the power of friendship, and it cuts both ways doesn't it? We are all being formed into something, whether for better or worse. Surround yourself with friends that are wiser, make better decisions than you do, and are kinder, more positive than you, and will reap the benefits. But the opposite is also true. Because what this principle about how things often work in God's world says is that if your friends are fools, when their life explodes, you are getting hit with the shrapnel. Sociologists tell us that relationships have a contagious effect on us like when someone yawns you yawn, or when they laugh you laugh. So if you want to know what your life will look like 5 years from now, look at your friendships. We all know this is true, mom has been telling us this your whole life even though we often deny it.

So let me say a word to students, parents and influencers of the next generation, the most formative thing about your kids is the community they are around which is why we are all in on a highly relational children's and student ministry. If you want to see who they will become, look at their friend group, who is in their social media circle, who they game with. So let me just say, if your kids are playing 5 sports or spending hours on unmonitored social media, or gaming and the rest of their time in public school... and are not really involved here at church circled up with other students and mentoring adults and then they grow up and want nothing to do with God, and you're like... "I didn't raise them to be this way." In love let me say, Yes you did. You may not have taught them to be that way, but you allowed the most formative influence in their lives to be fools. You might say, does that mean you shouldn't have any friendships with people that don't share your faith or go to church? Shouldn't we encourage our kids to be a light? Of course! But I would recommend a 2-1 ratio. Growing up I had almost no Christian friends and my life was virtually indistinguishable from my party friends that had a completely different worldview and morality than what was taught in my home. But I can't even begin to describe how transformative it was when I became friends with a few other wise Christians when I was 17 and eventually, I met lifelong friends like Todd at 18 years old, and Shannan at 19, and Jim Supp at 24, and Dave Young at 27 and Will Pavone when I was 30 and the list goes on... I am confident to say that God's sovereign hand formed where I'm going and who I have become most prominently through my friendships. Walk with the wise, grow wise. Make friends with fools, you will too.

So, this principle isn't just for youth and it's true for adults. Anyone know people who started hanging around cynical, angry, keyboard warriors and became more cynical, critical and angry because of it? Friendships form us, which means that if you want to make spiritual progress, if you want to be more biblically informed, more joy filled, more able to handle hardship when it comes, you need vital friendships that lead you in this direction, invite and link up with these

people...and we have an embarrassment of riches here, lots of them here. This leads us to the 2nd reason to pursue vital friendships.

2. Friends Reveal our Blind spots. Proverbs 27:6 *Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.* Friends tell us hard truth that we can't see. This is one of the ways we can tell real friendship from fake friends. A real friend tells you your breath stinks and gives you a mint, or if your shirt is tucked into your underwear, or the toilet paper is stuck to the bottom of your shoe. If your friends only ever tell you what you want to hear they aren't a true friend. When you meet their new boyfriend and you know he's a creep but you say, "oh you look happy together! He seems nice!" you aren't being a true friend. A real friend can usually tell you when you're about to do something stupid and you can't see it. Listen... we all have blind spots. All of us need someone who can look us in the face and says, "Bro"... or "Hey sister...can we talk?"

The NT says that in the church, our relationships should be characterized this way. Hebrews 3:13 *But exhort one another every day so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.* When you are in isolation and avoiding vital friendships, your blind spots grow unchecked... one of the saddest things to see if for someone to get to 50 or 60 years old and still are blind to their blind spots and sin patterns because there aren't close friends in their lives. In fact, some of those blind spots are what may be keeping them from friendships now. See the church is particularly wired to help one another like this because it forces us to be around people who are different from us, different ages, stages, backgrounds, personalities but we hold in common our faith which has the power to unite us across that diversity. Do you have people like this in your life that are willing to love you enough to tell you the truth about your blind spots? To say, brother can we talk? I've noticed some edge in your voice when you talk about your wife. Is there some bitterness or anger that we should talk about? Or sister can we talk? I feel like you've pulled back from church recently, is there something bothering you? Middle aged brother in the Lord, I've noticed out of nowhere you bought a red convertible and grew out your hair... can we talk? But seriously, I'm so thankful that I have people in my life- my wife, Todd, our ministry leadership team, some of our deacons, some other friends outside of our church...who I know will call me on my stuff, give me trusted wounds instead of flattery. Last reason to pursue vital friendships. Get these people in your life.

#3 Friends Care for Us when life falls apart. Proverbs 17:17 *A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.* In other words, who is in the pit with you when life smacks you in the face and punches you in the gut? Not if, but when...because we live in a broken world, where everything ultimately will be taken from us and we will have to face our greatest fears- we lose our job, tragedy strikes your family and you are sleeping on hospital couches more than your own bed, when the dark night of your soul hits you when you didn't see it coming, the specter of death...who's in the pit with you? Solomon, the writer of Proverbs in his companion book of Ecclesiastes says it like this, Ecclesiastes 4:10 *But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.* When that day comes, what you need is not a bunch of Facebook, or Instagram friends. You need someone to just show up with chicken soup and a big hug. Someone who will take care of your laundry. Someone who will listen to your lament

without judgment. People surrounding you so that you can say...well at least I'm not alone. C. S. Lewis says this, "When you go through pain, it's not theological reasoning you most need, it's the slightest touch of human sympathy."⁶ The NT says the church is built for this. Bear one another's burdens. Weep with those who weep. The church should be a place where you've got a friend [Title Slide]. Now if you are old enough, or just enjoy good music you may recognize that phrase as a Carol King and James Taylor song. Let me read the first stanza.

When you're down and troubled
 And you need some lovin' care
 And nothin', nothin' is goin' right
 Close your eyes and think of me
 And soon I will be there
 To brighten up even your darkest night
 You just call out my name
 And you know, wherever I am
 I'll come runnin'
 To see you again
 Winter, spring, summer or fall
 All you have to do is call
 And I'll be there
 You've got a friend

Do you have relationships like this in your life? Do you have brothers and sisters like this here at Brandywine? Who would you call when the darkest night comes? All of us should have an answer to this question, and it can't just be the Pastor. Yes, call us. But who else comes running?

Friends form us, reveal our blind spots and care for us when life falls apart. Now maybe you would be hard pressed to say that you have people like this in your life. What do you do about it? I want to encourage you to take a next relational step. Pursue places where meaningful relationships can form and potentially lead to these vital friendships. One of our core values is Meaningful Membership and Community. We are committed to helping those who are not currently connected with a caring community to find one. Next Sunday, September 17, before and after each of the services we will host our annual Connect Fair. The purpose of this Fair is to connect those who attend Brandywine Valley with one of our Small Groups. At the Connect Fair you will be able to talk with Small Group leaders about what groups are offered this fall. You can get guidance concerning what group best fits your schedule and stage of life. We have five women's group, 6 men's groups, 13 small groups and 18 support groups available that meet on different days and times throughout the week.

A new small group called **Front Porch** will launch for the fall semester. Not everyone has a front porch. But most people have places where friends, family, and even strangers gather for conversation and new friendships. Front Porch is the first step to joining a small group. Front

⁶ C.S. Lewis in *The Problem with Pain* as quoted by J.D. Greear.

Porch is a twice per month gathering that begins on October 3rd here at church. Each session includes a time of worship, prayer and small group Bible study.

Our desire is that everyone who attends Brandywine feels a sense of connection and belonging. We invite you to make a new connection by joining a small group!