

There is a friend closer than a brother

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Series: Being Human

Texts: Proverbs 17.17, 18.24, 13.20, 22.24-25, 27.6; John 15.9-17

As many of you know I studied Roman History at uni. In the acknowledgements for my honours thesis, I wrote this to my friend:

“Thank you for being willing to discuss all things ancient and modern at any time of the day or night. Without you I would have felt a traveller, alone in some provincial backwater longing to converse with someone on the happenings in the Forum. You have always been ready to give advice and encouragement and your assistance in the final days of this project was invaluable. Laelius was not a better friend.”

Laelius was a Roman politician who was best known for his friendship with the great general Scipio Aemilianus which was immortalised in a book on friendship by Cicero, the title of which is “Laelius on Friendship.”

In this our final sermon on *Being Human* (yes, well done for getting this far!) we're looking at the topic of friendship. I began with the dedication to my honours thesis because my studies in Roman History were also a period of happy and deep friendship. Reading Cicero's book on Friendship also prompted me to think about friendship in general and my own friendships in particular. In Willa Cather's novel *Shadows on the Rock*, one of the characters says, “Only solitary men know the full joys of friendship. Others have their family; but to a solitary and an exile his friends are everything.”¹ That has been my experience. As an only child and one who grew up in PNG, loneliness was never far off the horizon. I didn't have siblings to play with. Coming back to Australia at the start of high school, only my parents knew the kind of life I had lived. I made one friend in year 7, but then transferred to another school and never really made any friends among my classmates. Church for me was the place where I made friends, some of whom I'm still in touch with nearly 30 years later. My hope is that St George's would likewise be a place where you can find lifelong friendships.

We've tackled some difficult topics in this series, but for me the topic of friendship is perhaps the most emotionally difficult. That is because I miss my friends. I accept that life has taken us to different places. Work and marriage and kids are all good, but they often mean we part company. I still just want to see them and hang out. One of the things I imagine and look forward to about the resurrection and the life everlasting is that friendships will be renewed and we'll have all the time in the world just to enjoy each other's company. So this sermon is something of an ode to friendship. We'll look at some of the challenges of friendship, the blessings of friendship and then finish with that extraordinary text from John 15 where Jesus calls us his friends.

¹ Quoted in Wes Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, Brazos, 2015: 14

The challenges of friendship

We have a paradoxical relationship with friendship in our culture. On the one hand it's highly prized. All the best sitcoms centre on friendship - Brooklyn 99, Community, Friends (that one is really obvious), Seinfeld (Ok, I know these show my age). At the same time we're suspicious that if a friendship gets too deep it will spill over into sex. In his book *Spiritual Friendship*, Wes Hill suggests this goes back to Freud who argued that "the desire for sex is the secret truth of every relationship."² This suspicion has pushed friendships to the margins of society, especially for men. It has meant we often misunderstand and wrongly sexualise the deep friendships we read of in earlier ages, like that of David and Jonathan in the Bible. I remember this with my friend at uni. We just loved hanging out. We'd go to parties together. We'd have coffee. We'd go clothes shopping (mainly because he was way better dressed than me!) And we'd have to fend off jokes about our bromance.

Culturally we're in an epidemic of loneliness. And it's worse for men than for women. Research from the Australian Men's Health Forum found that 1 in 4 men have no one to share their private worries and fears with. Lack of social connection can be as unhealthy as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness increases likelihood of early death by 26% and men account for 3 out of every 4 suicides in Australia.³ Psychologist John Gottman says that an over-reliance on romantic partners for emotional support can strain relationships. "The challenge lies not just in seeking support from a variety of other humans, but in offering that support by being vulnerable, authentic, and transparent." But these are often not viewed as masculine qualities.⁴

Often male friendships form around shared activities or tasks. Hence why sports teams (and I might add choirs) are so significant in male friendships. I'm conscious that my stage of life - with young kids, ageing parents, and professional responsibilities - is one of the most time poor periods of life, and so sustaining and especially making new friends can be difficult. When you're a kid, it's often a matter of "You're here. I'm here. Let's play and be friends." As you get older, you have to make a conscious choice to prioritise friendship or it will pass you by.

Another threat to friendship is when we approach relationships thinking, "What can I get out of this person?" This reduces the relationship to a transaction. Friendship is about enjoying each other's company. That leads to one of the ironies of friendship. There is something strange and hard to grasp about friendship. It can't be forced or manufactured. It is something that just happens, often as people seek a shared goal or task. You recognise a shared spark of interest or insight or taste and, in C.S. Lewis' words, say, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one." Lewis suggests, "we picture lovers face to face but friends side by side. ... That is why ... people who simply "want friends" can

² *Spiritual Friendship*, 6

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<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/article/as-bad-as-smoking-15-cigarettes-a-day-what-happens-w-hen-men-dont-prioritise-friendship/at5pah9nn>

⁴ <https://www.gottman.com/blog/why-men-struggle-with-close-connections/>

never make any,” because they focus on finding the friendship instead of the shared pursuit which is the condition of friendship.⁵

There can also be dark sides to friendship. Friendships can be turned in on themselves. They can close themselves off from the rest of the world. Friends can become needy, obsessive, co-dependent, smothering. For the health of the friendship and the people in the friendship, there needs to be space to let light in from the outside. Just as we should not invest all our emotional eggs in the basket of a romantic partner, that is even more the case for a friendship which in principle is open for others to share in your joy.

I asked my kids about what can be bad about friendship, and they said, “Friends can be a bad influence.” This comment reflects the wisdom we find in the Bible. Proverbs 22.24-25 says,

Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person,
do not associate with one easily angered,
or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared.

Or, put most succinctly in 1 Corinthians 15.33, “Bad company corrupts good character.”

Perhaps the most famous example of this, in Christian history at least, is from Augustine’s *Confessions*. “Friendship,” he writes, “can be a dangerous enemy.” He recounts when he was a teenager, hanging out with his mates. They stole a basket of pears. Reflecting back he asks “Why did I steal the pears? They weren’t particularly tasty pears. I had better pears at home. We ate only a couple and threw the rest to pigs.” He realises that he wouldn’t have stolen the pears had he been alone. He joined in the theft because he wanted to fit in with the group, and then with his friends enjoyed doing what he knew was wrong. In a similar way he talks about making up stories of sexual conquests in order to not be despised by his peers.⁶ Turns out life as a teenage boy in the 4th century was not so different as today!

There is wisdom in paying attention to the influence our friends have on us, and there are times when you have to part company. But just as friends can be a bad influence, so the reverse is also true: Proverbs 13.20 reads, “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.” And this brings us to point 2, the blessings of friendship.

The blessings of friendship

We’ve seen that we all need friends. We enjoy friendships from a very young age right through to the grave. Just this week I conducted a funeral for a gentleman who lived around the corner from church. Two of the people who gave eulogies were his friends, one from the last 20 years or so, and the other from 50 years. Friendships have a powerful effect on our lives. Studies have shown the single biggest

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 1960, Fontana: 62-63

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, book II.

predictor of our psychological health and wellbeing, our physical health and wellbeing, and even how much longer we're going to live, is the number of close friendships and family relationships we have.⁷

For the ancients, friendship was a school of character. One of the people who comes to Deeper Conversations is a retired policeman. He says he likes hanging out with good people because he knows they have a good influence on him. I take it he has seen ample evidence of how the opposite is true! But that influence goes both ways. You can be a good influence on your friends. Proverbs 27.6 is an example of this.

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

To be a true friend is to have your friend's best interests at heart. To give a rebuke risks damaging the friendship and requires wise timing. It takes trust and depth of relationship to tell a friend when they've done something stupid or hurtful, or to warn them from doing something destructive. And yet to hold our tongue is to deprive our friend of the opportunity to change and grow. So we would do well to pay attention if a friend calls us to account.

When I asked my kids what is good about friends, Imogen said, "They are someone you can do stuff with. Someone you can share your feelings with. Someone who can help you." She was spot on. I love Proverbs 17.17 and 18.24.

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.

One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,

but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

As an only child, my friends have been the closest thing I've had to brothers. And indeed you can have friends who are closer than family; Who you can pour your heart out to and know that they will be there for you without judgement; Who just get you; Who you can talk to for hours; or with whom you can just sit in happy silence. Such friendships are the gift of God and they bring joy and colour to life.

Good friends are reliable, trustworthy and loyal. They stick by you and are there for you through not just the good but also the bad. C.S. Lewis suggests that, "the mark of perfect friendship is not that help will be given when the pinch comes (of course it will) but that, having been given, it makes no difference at all." In this sense there is no moral calculus to friendship. There is no tallying up favours (or wrongs). All is freely given. I remember getting a call from a friend at 2am one night asking me to pick him up from somewhere. I was just glad that I was his friend and that he knew he could call me.

We've said that one of the dangers of friendship is that they can become insular and introspective. It's for this reason that friendships flourish best in community. We cannot place all our emotional needs upon one other person, that burden is too great and we will be disappointed. That's true for marriage. It's true for friendships. Community also creates the context for us to find friends.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/may/25/we-dont-do-deep-emotional-discussions-why-men-lose-their-friends-and-how-they-can-make-more>

Friendships can also build and strengthen community. Wes Hill writes, “If it’s true that communities may spare friendships from becoming too narcissistic and exclusive, it’s also true that our friendships may, in turn, spare our communities from becoming too bureaucratic and impersonal.”⁸ I’m conscious of this with church. There are always jobs for us to do at church. And yes, friendships are often forged as you put your hands to the plough with someone. But church is about people. Our tasks are a means to that end. I want us to be a place where we enjoy each other’s company, and indeed where we have space and opportunity just to hang out and have fun.

We’ve tried to incorporate this into our Vision. One of our 2026 goals is, “building a more connected church community through parish lunches and working bees and as we eat and work together.” I had hoped to have a variety night this year, but sadly that hasn’t come together. But if you have suggestions for what we could do just to waste time together, or if you’d like to organise something, please let me know!

This leads to another blessing of friendship. At their best they are a doorway to hospitality and welcoming the stranger. In Hebrews 13 we read, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” We seek to do that corporately at church. But the door opens to friendship when we invite someone for a coffee, or to the pub or to our homes. I recognise that the call to hospitality is somewhat counter-cultural in Australia. And there is a Tasmanian element to this as well. I’ve found that native Tasmanians often make their friends at school and then are more closed to making new friends beyond that circle. If we worship a God who is in the business of befriending strangers, then as his people we’re called to imitate that hospitality. That leads to our final point - Jesus our friend.

Jesus our friend

There are lots of different pictures that the Bible uses to describe God’s relationship to us - shepherd, king, husband, just to name a few. But in John 15 Jesus uses the language of friendship. The context for this is Jesus’ command: “Love each other as I have loved you.” Then he goes on to say,

13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command. **15** I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. **16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. **17** This is my command: love each other.

Notice what Jesus says to us here. First, that he lays down his life for his friends. This is how he shows his love for us. It’s a line we see most commonly at war memorials, recalling the bravery and self-sacrifice of soldiers on the battlefield giving their lives for their mates. Loyalty in friendship

⁸ *Spiritual Friendship*, 110

means a willingness to suffer with and for your friends. But here Jesus speaks of his death. What is extraordinary is that through his death Jesus takes us from being God's enemies to being his friends. This is what his death accomplishes. The cross is the proof of his friendship and love for us.

Second, because we are his friends, Jesus has shared with us God's will. The contrast is with a servant. Their job is to simply do what the master commands. They don't need to know why. They don't get to ask questions. They just obey. In contrast, Jesus says, "everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." Because he calls us friends Jesus shares his heart with us. The whole of John's gospel is a window into Jesus' relationship with God the Father. Here we get the summary: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love." And how are we to do that? By obeying his command to love, just as he has obeyed his Father's commands. But there in verse 11 we have an extraordinary statement.

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." What is friendship, if not wanting to share our joy with our friends, so that they too may share in our joy? And this is what Jesus wants for us, his friends. We find this joy in obeying his commands and loving each other as he has loved us.

Jesus' friendship is a gift, freely given to us. Verse 16. "You did not choose me, but I chose you." And this friendship is for a purpose: "and [I] appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last." What is that fruit? For my money is the life of love that he calls us to here.

We've explored a little of what friendship looks like today, both its challenges and blessings. The astonishingly good news of the gospel is that in Jesus, God invites us to be his friends. Not only does he invite us, but he lays down his life for us to make his friends. And he does this so that we might know his love and share in his joy as we live the life of love he calls us to. Friends do come and go in life. To have good friends is a wonderful gift from God. But whatever our circumstances, there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother, and that is Jesus himself. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He is utterly faithful. He is always ready to listen and always ready to help in our time of need.