

How Friends Help Us Draw Near to God

Friendship is not optional.

R. Kent Hughes

You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours—closer than you yourself keep it. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo. Anyway: there it is. We know most of what Gandalf has told you. We know a good deal about the ring. We are horribly afraid—but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Introduction:

Current landscape of friendship:

Three Key Theses Regarding Friendship:

1. Friendship helps us draw near to God, because God is the very origin of friendship itself.
 - *J.D. Greear*: Every other relationship we experience had a genesis. Marriage was created. The parent-child relationship was created. Work relationships were created. But friendship was never created. It's part of the eternal nature of God. Ponder that till your brain hurts: there has never been a time when there was not friendship.
 - *J.D. Greear*: Adam wasn't lonely because he was imperfect; Adam was lonely because he was perfect. Every other problem in our lives arises out of our sin and imperfections. But loneliness is the one problem that we have because we are made in God's image. So if you're content being a loner, congratulations: you aren't very much like God.
2. Friendship with one another is the most basic way and one of the most profound ways we image God.
3. Friendships that help us draw near to God are friendships that are centered on pursuing Jesus Christ!

Aelred of Rievaulx: And so in friendship are joined honor and charm, truth and joy, sweetness and good-will, affection and action. And all these take their beginning from Christ, advance through Christ, and are perfected in Christ.

Augustine: There can be no true friendship unless those who cling to each other are welded together by you [God] in that love which is spread throughout our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us.

Friendships help us draw near to God by making his presence physical, tangible, and concrete

Jonathan Safran Foer:

Most of our communication technologies began as diminished substitutes for an impossible activity. We couldn't always see one another face to face, so the telephone made it possible to keep in touch at a distance. These inventions were not created to be improvements upon face-to-face communication, but a declension of acceptable, if diminished, substitutes for it.

But then a funny thing happened: we began to prefer the diminished substitutes. It's easier to make a phone call than to schlep to see someone in person. Leaving a message on someone's machine is easier than having a phone conversation—you can say what you need to say without a response; hard news is easier to leave; it's easier to check in without becoming entangled. So we began calling when we knew no one would pick up.

Shooting off an e-mail is easier, still, because one can hide behind the absence of vocal inflection, and of course there's no chance of accidentally catching someone. And texting is even easier, as the expectation for articulateness is further reduced, and another shell is offered to hide in. Each step "forward" has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than humanity.

THE problem with accepting—with preferring—diminished substitutes is that over time, we, too, become diminished substitutes.¹

¹ Jonathan Safran Foer, "How Not to Be Alone," *New York Times*, June 8, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/opinion/sunday/how-not-to-be-alone.html?_r=0.

Friendships give us the widest context for the most significant work we do as a Christian

William Deresiewicz: As for the moral content of classical friendship, its commitment to virtue and mutual improvement, that, too, has been lost. We have ceased to believe that a friend's highest purpose is to summon us to the good by offering moral advice and correction. We practice, instead, the nonjudgmental friendship of unconditional acceptance and support—"therapeutic" friendship. We seem to be terribly fragile now. A friend fulfills her duty, we suppose, by taking our side—validating our feelings, supporting our decisions, helping us to feel good about ourselves...We're busy people; we want our friendships fun and friction-free.²

Richard Baxter: We will take all things well from one that we know entirely loves us. We will put up with a blow that is given us in love sooner than with a foul word that is spoken to us in malice or in anger. If you be their best friends, help them against their worst enemies.

Friendships help us draw near to God by bearing burdens and bringing them to the Lord together

How to help your counselees build friendships with others:

² William Deresiewicz, "Faux Friendship," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 6, 2009. <http://chronicle.com/article/Faux-Friendship/49308/>.

1. What's your counselee's experience with friendship?
2. Recognize that part of what brings them to you in counseling is potentially part of what makes friendship difficult
3. Engage in role plays with your counselees
4. Think through if/then scenarios with your counselees
5. Rejoice in the Lord when friendships are formed
6. Give your counselees practical exercises to build friendships

Conclusion

Karina Kreminski: Our privilege of being friends with God is a model for our engagement with the world and it is our witness so that others might practice friendship. Practicing friendship has often been relegated to the sphere of children, women and the sentimental. However, it is something we can all try as a subversive practice that can change our world. As we make friends, we trust that our friend Jesus, who is a friend of sinners, is with us, helping us, in our participation with him on his mission to mend all things broken and decaying in our world.³

³ <http://www.missioalliance.org/subversive-act-friendship/>.

MISCELLANEOUS QUOTES

William Blake: Opposition is true friendship.

C.S. Lewis: Friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life. If I had to give a piece of advice to a young man about a place to live, I think I should say, “Sacrifice almost everything to live where you can be near your friends.”

R. Kent Hughes: The deepest of friendships have in common this desire to make the other person royalty. They work for and rejoice in the other’s elevation and achievements. There are no hooks in such friendships, no desire to manipulate or control, no jealousy or exclusiveness—simply a desire for the best for the other.

Augustine: ...to talk and laugh and do kindness to each other; to read pleasant books together; to make jokes together and then talk seriously together; to be sometimes teaching and sometimes learning... These and other similar expressions of feeling, which proceed from the hearts of those who love and are loved in return, and are revealed in the face, the voice, the eyes, and in a thousand charming ways, were like a kindling fire to melt our souls together and out of many to make us one.

Charles Bridges: What is the friend, who will be a real blessing to my soul? Is it enough that he will humour my fancies, and flatter my vanity? Is it enough that he loves my person, and would spend his time and energies in my service? This comes far short of my requirement. I am a poor straying sinner, with a wayward will and a blinded heart; going wrong at every step. The friend for my case is one who will watch over me with open rebuke; but a reprover when needful; not a flatterer. The genuineness of a friendship without this mark is more than doubtful; its usefulness utterly paralyzed.

Tim Keller on friendship:

http://reformedevangelist.blogspot.com/2015/12/a-transcription-of-tim-kellers_18.html

An interesting connection that several in the counseling community are making is the connection between loneliness and mental health. Noted Dutch psychiatrist, *J.H. Van Dan Berg* observes the relationship between the two in a revealing paragraph:

“The psychiatric patient is alone. He has few relationships or perhaps no relationships at all. He lives in isolation. He feels lonely. He may even dread an interview with another person. At times, conversation with him is impossible. He is somewhat strange; sometimes he is enigmatic and he may, on rare occasions, be even unfathomable. The variations are endless but the essence is always the same: the psychiatric patient stands apart from the rest of the world. This is why he has a world of his own: in his world, houses can sway forward and flowers can look dull and colorless. This is why he also has a special sort of body: his heart aches, his legs are weak and powerless. His past, too, is different. His rearing has failed, and this in turn causes his difficulties with other people—difficulties that summarize, as it were, all his other complaints. He is alone. He is a lonely man. Loneliness is the central core of his illness, no matter what his illness may be. Thus, loneliness is the nucleus of psychiatry. If loneliness did not exist, we could reasonably assume that psychiatric illness could not occur either...”[*A Different Existence*, 105].