



Food For Thought:

What a Friend I Have In Jesus

*“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you..”*

~ John 15:15

We were having dinner the other night with friends and we began reminiscing on how and why we met. We were both looking for new Christian friends and fate brought us together around a dinner table at the church. It’s been quite a few years now, and we have become very close.

It is those intersections in life that I believe happen not by happenstance but as part of God’s plan. Every person is a walking story, whose life is filled with subplots, characters, tragedy, and even comedy. Most of the time we get so caught up with our own daily drama that we ignore the stories of those around us. But every now and then, God connects people and together they become part of the bigger story of who He is and how He loves us.

As Christians, we need those friendships, both in and outside our faith. Believers have a built-in camaraderie that flows out of a common love for Jesus and a shared desire to know God better which making talking to other believers easy – it’s a common bond.

I once read an article that stated that we choose our friends based upon characteristics and traits that we admire, but don't possess. For example, you may not laugh a lot, but you have a friend that keeps you in stitches. So we seek their company to elevate our spirits when we need that. The article also stated that we should look at each of our friends and see what characteristic we admire so that we can learn what is missing in us – sort of a self-help therapy exercise. I had so many friends that I figured that I didn't have any great qualities of my own. It depressed me so much that I gave up on the idea.

So, I began to wonder, how might God's friendship inspire us to improve our friendships with others? I am kind of old school and enjoy the face-to-face conversations with people to get to know them, but there is a new trend rising in the church – using Facebook, Twitter and all the other social medias to contact and connect God's people.

God knows that close friendships can be risky, but friendships without the benefit of even seeing a person, well that really bazaar. It reminds me of that commercial that ran a few years back with a twenty-something comments that her parents didn't know what fun was. She said that she had over 600 friends while she looking at her phone screen at something that one of her friends posted and said, that "she knew what fun was" while her parents, on the other hand, were out bicycling with friends, didn't. It was sad. But sadly, it was just a harbinger of things to come.

I ran across an article in the *Chicago Tribune* about a study in 2018 that was conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that follows this new kind of thinking. They stated that more than a third of Americans below the age of 50 lack any religious affiliation and to attract more younger parishioners into the pews, they have begun marketing God to the tech-savvy youth by publishing links to biblical messages and sermons on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. One church went so far as to invite congregations use text messaging for their questions during services. In fact, I looked into that very subject for the Pastor just last month.

Although I would agree that we are seeing a change in our culture with the integration of social media into every walk of life, and I agree that there is some potential in using technology to expand the kingdom of God, but texting during service would put a whole new meaning to the popular textspeak phrase, "OMG."

What would be next, "*Is God on your Friend's List?*"

I am not sure that this impersonal, superficial nature of online "friending" is what John talked about when he said, that Jesus personally reached out to humankind. He befriended us when "[He] became human and made his home among us". Jesus lived with us humans—He locked eyes with some, healed others, ate meals, fished, sailed, preached— all because He refused to stay removed from our world. He came to earth so that we could know Him not only as God, but also as a fellow human and friend.

Jesus told His disciples, "*Now you are my friends*", and He proved it by confiding in them. He said, "I have told you everything the Father told me". This level of sharing showed His care and created joy in the hearts of His followers. The depth of Jesus' friendship was also revealed by sacrifice. Jesus said, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends", and then He allowed himself to be crucified for our sake.

The friendship Jesus offers was not a one-click event—it's an ongoing thing. He loves us deeply and has invited us to remain in His love. Jesus wants to hear us and help us with our struggles every day. This close connection with Him can minister to our souls when we feel disconnected from the people in our world. It is the same way with our church.

I am convinced that one of the greatest things you will ever experience in life is the church at its best. Just look at our service this past Sunday - hundreds of people who came together to meet and experience Jesus. It was a wonderful Sunday - great fellowship, a Praise and Worship section that was uplifting and joyful, a great message, and the great Discipleship. Then Vacation Bible School started Monday, and that too has been a sight to behold. The church members all working together and volunteering their service, their time, their money all with gratitude. Not because no one else would do it, but because they truly have a passion and enthusiasm about not just telling people that "Jesus Loves Them" , but showing them through their sacrifices, gifts, musicality, voice, servitude, and their presence. It screamed, I am (underscore, underscore) a Christian for others to watch, see, and copy.

But for this to happen, there had to be leadership coming from the top down. Our church is blessed with Pastors that have communicated the church's Vision and Strategic Plan to the congregation so that there is a "buy in" by everyone. When a vision is cast well by leaders it rallies the troops, and sounds the trumpet so that the church can march forward as one. Then the whole church is in Partnership where we all can Nurture, Outreach, and Witness from the same plan. And that makes people feel like they belong and matter.

It is great when the church is hitting on all cylinders and growing/practicing healthy spiritual habits. The environment becomes contagious, and the whole congregation and community begin to behave differently – they all want to be part of it because they know that they have God's favor and blessings.

And at every activity, there are new opportunities to make new friends. People are happy to see you, come. It is more like a family reunion than a Church service. Have you ever walked into a room and you just know that people want you there? It seems that God does too – I think it is part of His plan.

Through Him, we develop friendships. Some of those friendships will make you a better person. They will improve your life. They help you work on the things that need grinding down and filed off. Friends help each other sand blast the rusty, rough edges and smooth out the hard and coarse spots. Although this is not a pleasant thing, sometimes that is what it takes to build you up and encourage you to be better.

True friends seek to bring out the best in you.

I heard a story about a young boy and how he was sent to the store by his mother to buy a loaf of bread. He was gone much longer than it should have taken him. When he finally came home, his mother asked, "Where have you been? I've been worried about you." He answered, "there was a little boy by the side of the road with a broken bicycle who was crying. So I stopped to help him." "I didn't know you knew anything about fixing bikes," his mother said. "I don't," he replied. "I just stayed there and cried with him."

Sometimes the best thing you can do for someone is to just stay there and cry with them. Friends come alongside you on your journey. They lend support to us. They rejoice with us, and when necessary, cry with us. A friend is the one that comes when everyone else goes. You see that in our church every Sunday.

I think that friendship is part of Christian living. Solomon, one of the wisest people who ever lived, said in Ecclesiastes 4:12, "A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken. The greatest gift you can give anyone is the gift of an invitation. It is that gift of "let's sit together." Let's walk together. Come join me that makes people feel wanted.

Some of you came to church because a friend invited you. You may have even thought that your friend was a little bit of a religious freak in the beginning. But they were sharing with you the grace and acceptance that comes from being wrapped together as one with Christ.

And that is a true friend.

God did not make us to go through life alone. We were made for community. Believers have a built-in camaraderie that flows out of a common love for Jesus and a shared desire to know God better.

When you look around you in church and all you see is the same people you have seen week after week, month after month and year after year, and there are no new faces, no new people, and you have no new friends, then it is time for you to invite people to the church.

Remember, a lot of Christian living has to do with planting. You plant a seed here. You plant a seed there. Pretty soon, you'll meet new people and new people give you new opportunities for friendship both with you and Jesus.

Remember, friends don't let friends go through life without Jesus.

Just some Food for Thought