

FAIRVIEW UNITED METHODIST CHURCH NEWSLETTER

Loving God & Loving Others = worship + missions

TRUE FRIENDS ARE HARD TO FIND

Article by Kelly Needham
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True friends are hard to find. They stick closer than family, and often know you better. They pray bigger things for you than you pray for yourself. They believe with you when your faith is weak. They make space for you when life falls apart, and they rejoice with you when all is well. Most importantly, true friends remind you in every encounter who and what is most important.

The essence of Christian friendship is companionship forged in the fire of two convictions: 1) Jesus alone can satisfy the soul and 2) his kingdom alone is worth living for.

Enemies in Disguise?

Christian friendship is a treasure because it helps us cling to our greatest Treasure.

Jesus is our Bread of Life, our Living Water, our Pearl of Great Price, our Light, our Resurrection, our very Life. The greatest danger to our souls is that we might abandon abiding in him, following him, and finding our joy in him. Therefore, the best gift a friend can give is a commitment to fight for our joy in and communion with Christ.

Conversely, the worst distortion of friendship arises when a friend encourages us, consciously or unconsciously, to place our affections elsewhere. The apostle Peter unwittingly acts out this kind of distortion in Matthew 16. Jesus tells his disciples that he will die and rise again (Matthew 16:21). Peter rebukes Jesus with what was surely a well-intentioned comment from a loyal friend: “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matthew 16:22).

It looks like the deepest, most genuine, most beautiful form of friendship, but Peter’s words put him between Jesus and his obedience to the Father. His ignorance made a friend into an enemy, at least for a moment. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me” (Matthew 16:23). What Peter thought was helpful, Jesus called a hindrance. What Peter assumed was godly friendship, Jesus called satanic opposition.

Five Marks of Christian Friendship

So, how can we avoid Peter’s mistake in our friendships? How can we be a friend who preserves and strengthens the faith of others? Here are five distinct ways that true Christian friendships bolster our love for Christ through our love for one another.

1. True friends heighten our joy in God.

Companionship always deepens joy. My favorite movie is good when watched alone, but it’s better with a friend. Somehow a great meal is more satisfying when shared. We naturally drag our friends into what we enjoy: “You have to see this movie!” “You have to come to this restaurant with me!”

But of all the joys of life, God is the greatest! We were made for him — to enjoy him and center our hearts and lives on him. And like any other joy, our joy in God will be fullest when we share it with other people. Christian friends help us enjoy God by enjoying him with us.

It’s tempting to flip and distort this formula by using God as a means to enjoy people more. If we only go to him to ask for spouses, friends, or kids to enjoy, it reveals we see God as the means to someone else. We should be doing the opposite: looking for more of him in other people. Ironically, we will enjoy our friends more, the more our friendships become a means of enjoying God.

2. True friends expose sin in us that keeps us from God.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy. (Proverbs 27:6)

Sin deceives us. It darkens our understanding and makes us fools. So much so that we may be walking in sin and convinced that we are obeying God (think of the Pharisees). This is why we desperately need friends.

We need friends to lovingly show us our sin. We need friends to help us see our blind spots. We need friends to speak with brutal honesty (Matthew 18:15) and tender compassion (Galatians 6:1), telling us the truth about ourselves even when we don't want to hear it (Ephesians 4:15).

This is a vital function of community that few people want. We'd much rather have friends who always tell us what we want to hear, who show us the false grace of excusing sin and give us false hope that we can grow closer to God without repentance. But because sin is a poison to our souls and a thief of our joy in God, we cannot afford to forsake this kind of friendship.

3. True friends encourage us to obey God.

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. (Hebrews 10:24; see also Hebrews 3:13)

While it is true we need friends to help us see any disobedience, we also need them to spur us on to obedience. Often, obedience to God takes more courage than we can muster alone. Without the faithful cheerleading of Christian friends, we easily shrink back into stagnant apathy, not wanting to willfully disobey, but also too afraid to step out in faith.

The encouragement we are told to give isn't flattery, or superficial inspiration. Encouragement is giving courage and strength to others for the intimidating task before them. We cast a bigger vision for why their obedience matters for God's kingdom. We affirm that their obedience glorifies God and counts in eternity.

Whatever form it takes, encouragement motivates others to continue running the specific race God has marked out for them.

4. True friends bring us to God in our weakness.

Behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. (Luke 5:18–19)

Walking through life in a God-belittling world, with our sin-ridden flesh, against a hell-bent enemy, is too hard to be attempted alone. Alone, we easily believe the lies of Satan. Alone, we buckle under the weight of our sin. Alone, we grow discouraged and weary. Like the paralytic, we need the help of other believers to carry us to God.

So, how can we bring others to God? We listen to a sister confess a hidden sin and wash her with the truth that Christ has cleansed her and made her whole. We can meet the practical needs of those enduring intense suffering in Jesus's name. Or we can simply bring our friends to God in prayer, asking him to do greater things in their lives than we can do for them.

5. True friends love us for the glory of God.

Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

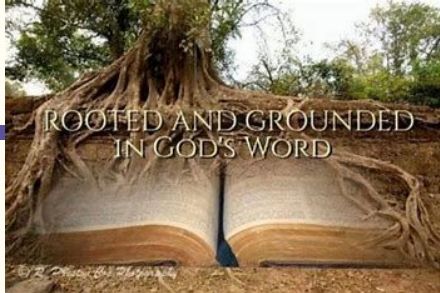
The world's idea of intimacy in friendship is making much of one another: "I can't live without you!" Compliments and pledges of devotion quickly give a brief and false adrenaline rush of importance and significance. We certainly need to encourage and affirm one another, but Christian friends should be far more focused on God's weight and significance — not their own or their friend's.

Like everything else, the end goal of our friendships should be God and his glory. Since our hearts are prone to wander away and worship other things, we need these constant reminders of his glory and his worth in our friendships.

GROUNDING IN SCRIPTURE

#BeUMC

ResourcesUMC.org/BeUmc



Philippians 4:8-9

From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine. Through Scripture, the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace. We are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God in our midst whom we trust in life and death. The biblical authors, illumined by the Holy Spirit, bear witness that in Christ the world is reconciled to God. The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history. As we open our minds and hearts to the Word of God through the words of human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our understanding is deepened, and the possibilities for transforming the world become apparent to us.

John Wesley: I want to know one thing — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri [a person of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of [others]. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.

This Bible calls us to focus our thoughts on that which is excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely and worthy of praise. How does a daily practice of reading the Bible help us keep that focus? What are some things that distract us? • Are there things that are not necessarily bad that can bring us into a place where we struggle to see the excellent and admirable?

United Methodists are encouraged to “open our minds and hearts” as we read Scripture. Why is that an important posture to bring to our Bible reading?

In what ways is the Bible central to your life and faith? How could you grow in your practice of reading, understanding and meeting Christ in the Bible?

Closing prayer

Thank you God for meeting us where we are every day. We are so grateful for the Bible, and the opportunities we have to meet Christ there and learn the way to heaven. May we continue to draw closer to you as we come into your presence through the words of Scripture each day. Amen.

Join us on Ash Wednesday,
February 22, for worship
service at 7 p.m. at Virginia
UMC.

Better Together

**Wednesday,
February 15, 2023
2:00-4:00 p.m.**

The Virginia Community Senior Center would like to welcome all seniors, 55 years and older, to participate every third Wednesday. Please join us at the **Virginia United Methodist Church's Fellowship Hall** with guest speaker Virginia Chief of Police, Eric Shumate.



OUR STAFF AND SERVICES AT A GLANCE

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