

DON'T DO LIFE ALONE:

Celebrating Friendship

Romans 1:7-17

February 3, 2008

On May 9, 1996, dozens of climbers camped at the base of Mount Everest, ready to trek to the top of the mountain. They had everything money could buy: the best gear and food and maps. But they lacked on thing money couldn't buy – friendships. Listen to how author Jon Krakauer described the scene:

There were more than fifty people camped on the Col that night, huddled in shelters pitched side by side, yet an odd feeling of isolation hung in the air. The roar of the wind made it impossible to communicate from one tent to the next. In this godforsaken place, I felt disconnected from the climbers around me—emotionally, spiritually, physically—to a degree I hadn't experienced on any previous expedition. We were a team in name only, I'd sadly come to realize. Although in a few hours we would leave camp as a group, we would ascend as individuals linked to one another by neither rope nor any deep sense of loyalty. Each client was in it for himself or herself ...

The results of this approach were disastrous. Climbers came upon others who were lying close to death in the snow and simply moved on without offering food, water, or oxygen. They passed the other climbers without a word, and as one later explained: “We were too tired to help. Above 8,000 meters is not a place where people can afford morality” (or friendship).

This represents one way to live our lives. The motto is “Go alone. Trust no one. Don't get close to anyone. You're too busy and too tired to afford friendships.” The Bible presents us with a very different model for life: Jesus brings us into a new relationship with God and he also incorporates us into a new community that the Bible calls “the family of God.” At the center of this family, we experience new friendships. The passage you just heard outlines the nature of these new friendships and this new way to live life. Now it's interesting to find this concept right here because the Book of Romans is one of the densest, most theologically rich portions in the entire Bible. And yet, in the midst of this intellectual, logical masterpiece, we find this ode to friendship. And even though it was written by a busy businessman/pastor/church planter/cross-cultural missionary/scholar, Paul took time for his friends. From this passage I'd like to focus on four commitments that build friendships.

First, friends constantly express appreciation for one another. Notice that the New Testament letters, which were always written to imperfect people in flawed churches, almost always start with the positive. The message is: let me start with what you're doing right. This is so unlike the way most of us do life in community. We usually want to start with what's wrong. For example, if you're a teacher or if you know a teacher how many times do parents want to call you and just say, “Hey, you're doing a great job?” No, most teachers will tell you that parents usually call with a problem.

That's not the way Paul started this ode to friendship. Notice how he labels them in verse 7: you are "loved by God" and you are "called to be saints." Loved by God literally means you are God's beloved ones. Now of course we all have our categories of very special saints, but technically, we're all saints. A saint just refers to someone who has been set apart by God for a special purpose and destiny. If you have received Christ, that's you. We don't always act like saints. Sometimes we act very un-saintly. Sometimes we don't act like we're the beloved of God, but we still are God's beloved ones. You are too. So the first, the most basic, the most true thing about you is not that you're a sinner or you're broken or you're flawed or that you need a lot of work. As we look at each other in the body of Christ, the family of God, the most basic thing about you is that you are beloved by God and you are called to be a saint.

So notice how Paul continues: (verse 8) "First, I thank my God for all of you." And then he gives a specific reason: "because your faith is being reported around the world."

Appreciation can't just be thought or felt; it has to be expressed. You have to say, "I appreciate you and let me tell you why." Notice the same thing in the following verses:

- "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus." (1 Corinthians 1:3).
- "I thank my God every time I remember you." (Philippians 1:3).
- "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you." (Colossians 1:3).

Again, appreciation isn't just thought or felt; it's expressed. We have to form the words and say them out loud to people in our lives.

This is very powerful facet of all human relationships. Author and veteran youth worker Jay Kesler used to say, "Parents say to me, 'I can't get my teenagers to talk. They won't tell me about their lives.'" Kesler would ask them, "Do you ever show appreciation and acceptance? Do you understand their world? Do you just judge what they do wrong? Do you actually mouth the words, 'I appreciate ----?'"

We tend to be negative first. It was said about the novelist Thomas Hardy that whenever he strolled through the English countryside he would never see the wild flowers; he would only see the dung heap at the corner of a barn. The follower of Jesus has a very potent resource in seeing the wildflowers in someone's life and not just their dung heaps. The key is found in verse 17. The righteousness of God refers to a right standing before God. In other words, one of the key questions addressed in the Bible is this: how can human beings, who are flawed and sinful, stand confidently before a holy God? One option is that we could stand on our own righteousness, our own sense of rightness and hope that our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds. According to the Bible, that's a lousy option and a flimsy foundation. We need something stronger, more secure. That better foundation is called the righteousness of God that is found in Jesus Christ. In other words, when we trust Jesus we receive his track record, his foundation, his sense of being right with God. We stand before God on the Jesus-foundation. And that is always enough.

And then we treat one another as people who are standing on the foundation of Christ. In other words, I see your faults, I can't ignore them, sometimes they hurt and offend and irritate me, but they aren't the deepest thing about you. You are in Christ. Jesus is not done with you yet. Jesus has forgiven you – so I can too. Jesus sees you as the beloved of God so I choose to do that as well.

Secondly, friendship means praying consistently for people. Notice verse 9- “How *constantly* I remember you in my prayers.” And then verse 10 – “In my prayers *at all times*.” This wasn't a passing fancy or a sporadic discipline. It was woven into Paul's life to pray for his friends. Notice how seriously he took: “With God as my witness,” he said. That means that God was watching him. It wasn't just a flippant statement. There's a cartoon I saw once with a guy who sees his friend named Bob coming down the street. Over his head there's a bubble conveying his thoughts: “Hey, there's my friend Bob. O, no, I promised to pray for Bob. Okay, Lord, bless Bob.” Then in the next frame the guy raises his arms to welcome Bob as he exclaims, “Hey, Bob, my friend, wow, have I ever been praying for you!”

Have you ever done that? Based on Paul's example here God is telling me: knock it off. Really pray for people. Take it seriously. Arrange your life so you can say, “With God as my witness I pray for you at all times.”

If you don't know where to start or how to pray for people, pray one of the prayers in your Bible. You can use them verbatim or you can take them and adapt them. Here are a few examples:

- Ephesians 1:17-22
- Ephesians 3:16-19 – “I pray that out of his glorious riches ...” Isn't that a marvelous prayer? Isn't that rich and deep? You don't have to make up all your own words. Pray this for your spouse or your children or your friends.
- Philippians 1:9-11.

Third, friendships in the family of God thrive by sharing mutual encouragement.

Encouragement is a great New Testament word. One of the Greek meanings for the word used for encouragement referred to a soldier who was fainting in battle. He needed someone to breathe new life into his weary body; he was tired from the fight. Now notice that encouragement doesn't just mean saying, “Hey, nice haircut or nice tie – or jersey.” Notice how Paul described the process of encouragement in verses 11-12.

Encouragement means that it is the presence of Christ in me that imparts something in you. Something changes in you because of our conversation. And notice the result: it leaves you feeling stronger. Now I have to ask myself some tough questions about my encounters with others: As a result of that meeting or that conversation, do others feel stronger in Christ? Did something get imparted through me to their heart? Did I just fill the air with my words? Did I argue, convince, persuade, inform, perhaps manipulate and even motivate but I did not encourage others in Christ? Did I impart a spiritual gift to you?

And notice something very unusual in verse 12 – Paul abruptly interrupts himself by saying, “that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” Now I find that an astounding statement. Here’s Paul the great apostle, the great and mighty spiritual leader and yet he claims: “I need your encouragement as much as you need mine.” This isn’t some kind of hierarchical, one-way power-trip of a relationship. That’s not the way it works in the body of Christ. We are all beloved of God. We are all called to be saints. We all have spiritual gifts to offer. You need me, but I need you just as much.

Based on Romans 1:11-12 all of us who belong to Christ can make the following two statements:

- “Because I am in Christ so I have something good and strong to offer others.”
- “Because I am still growing in Christ I need you to receive something good and strong from you.”

Isn’t that first statement amazing? I hope you’re challenged and comforted by that statement. Say it to yourself, “I am in Christ so I have something good and strong to offer others.” And then you can also say, “Because I am still growing in Christ I need you to receive something good and strong from you.” Both statements are absolutely true.

So let me ask you: Where can you get this mutual encouragement? Well, the best place to get it isn’t necessarily on Sunday mornings. There are too many people here. The best place to give and receive it is in the context of smaller groups of people. After the second service today you’ll have an opportunity to explore small group life here at TVC.

Fourth, friendships in the family of God reach outward so that we can keep declaring the Gospel together. In other words, our friendships aren’t just an end in themselves. The Christian life isn’t just about finding a cozy, comfortable, likable, comfortable band of friends that I get to hang out with while I ignore the rest of the world around me. Not at all! Our friendships – our appreciation and prayers and mutual encouragement – always have an outward focus. We’re on a mission together.

Notice the way Paul describes the urgency and intensity of this mission. In verses 14-16 he makes three strong statements about the urgency for his friends to join him in reaching out to others:

- Verse 14 – “I am bound...” (or literally, “I am in debt”)
- Verse 15 – “I am ... eager ...”
- Verse 16 – “I am not ashamed...”

These are strong statements – not only was Paul in debt he was also eager and not ashamed to share the Gospel for others. Paul had good reasons for not being so excited about sharing the Good News of Jesus. Listen to the way the Bible scholar John Stott describes Paul’s situation:

Paul had ... reasons to feel reluctant or embarrassed as we do. Rome was the symbol of imperial pride and power. People spoke of it with awe. Everybody hoped to visit Rome

at least once in their lifetime, in order to look and stare and wonder. But who was this fellow Paul who wanted to visit the capital city not as a tourist but as an evangelist, and who believed he had something to say which Rome needed to listen to?

According to tradition, Paul was an ugly little guy with beetle brows, bandy legs, a bald pate, a hooked nose, bad eyesight and no great rhetorical gifts. So what could he hope to accomplish against the proud might of imperial Rome? Would he not be wiser to stay away? Or, if he must visit Rome, would it not be prudent for him to keep his big mouth shut, lest he be laughed out of court and hustled out of town? Evidently Paul did not think so.

And yet Paul could say, “I am in debt ... and I am eager” to join with you, as friends, to share the good news of Jesus with others. Now verse 14 is interesting. There are two ways that I could be in debt to you. If you loan me \$100 I’m in debt to you and I need to pay you back. On the other hand, you could also hand me \$100 and tell me to pass it on to Joe when I see him again. Paul is referring to the second kind of debt. God gave him and his friends the privilege of believing the Gospel, but it wasn’t just for them. It was for others. I’m in debt to Jesus because he blessed me so that I can turn around and pass the blessing on to others.

What is the blessing? He defines it in verse 16 – it’s the power of the Gospel for salvation. We have something to offer the world that no one else can give: power for salvation. The word power means dynamite. It’s power to change a person’s heart. Power to change bitterness into forgiveness. Power to change fear into trust. Power to change self-centeredness into love. It’s the power we celebrate as we gather around the Lord’s Table ...

So how are you living your life? Are you trying to do it alone? Are you connected in a small group? As we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table, let me challenge you to examine your life? Is your life open before God? Are you standing on the righteousness of Jesus Christ? Do you see others in Christ standing on that same righteousness? Are you connected or are you trying to live life alone?

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Friends constantly express _____ for one another.

- Romans 1:8 → “First, I thank my God for all of you.”
- 1 Corinthians 1:3 → “I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.”
- Philippians → “I thank my God every time I remember you.”
- Colossians 1:3 → “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.”

➔ The Basis for Appreciation – “the righteousness of God” (see verse 17).

Secondly, friendship means _____ consistently for people.

- Notice verse 9-10 “how _____ I remember you in my prayers at _____.
- Ephesians 1:17-22
- Ephesians 3:16-19 – “I pray that out of his glorious riches ...”
- Philippians 1:9-11.

Third, friendships thrive by sharing _____.

- “Because I am in Christ so I have something good and strong to offer others.”
- “Because I am still growing in Christ I need you to receive something good and strong from you.”

Fourth, friendships in Christ reach out by _____ the Gospel together

- Verse 14 – “I am bound...” (or literally, “I am in debt”)
- Verse 15 – “I am ... eager ...”
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