

# Faith Friends

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Colossians 4:7-18

Sermons Series:  
Best Spiritual  
Practices

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A British anthropologist Robin Dunbar has theorized about the number of people with whom we can maintain a meaningful relationship. There is a cognitive limit to the number of people we can befriend. The size of our brains, specifically the neocortex, does this limiting for us. Dunbar has determined through his research that the number of people with whom we can maintain a stable relationship is 150. This 150-person ceiling is known as Dunbar's number.

Facebook users might beg to differ. Maintaining a personal relationship with 150 people is bush league for Facebook users, who boast hundreds, if not thousands, of friends. But even Facebook has its limits. Facebook cuts you off at 5000 friends.

Facebook was conceived by three Harvard undergrads who are fabulously wealthy now. The most recognizable name among the three, Mark Zuckerberg, launched Facebook in his Harvard dorm room back in 2003. The idea quickly caught on with his classmates. By the end of the first week, half of the student body had signed on. The idea quickly

spread to other universities. By 2006, anyone with a valid email address was eligible. Today, Facebook is the most popular social networking site, with over 350 million subscribers worldwide.

Other social networks use less intimate terminology to portray contacts with other email users. LinkedIn, a social networking website for business professionals, employs the term "connections," and Twitter speaks of "followers," but Facebook has famously co-opted the word "friend."

Facebook can be a valuable social networking tool, but the designation "friend" is something of a misnomer. Friends are sometimes granted access to people's profiles who are mere acquaintances or even strangers. Can I really have a meaningful relationship with hundreds if not thousands of people? One psychologist calls the phenomenon of Facebook friends "sustaining an illusion of closeness in a complex world of continuous partial attention."

Most people don't turn to Facebook friends when they are in crisis. Whom do you turn to when you are up against it? The way you answer this question may tell you something

## *Do you have Christian soul mates?*

important about the people you regard as true friends.

This past spring we preached on the classic Christian disciplines of Scripture meditation, prayer, solitude, self-examination, Sabbath and the like. We call these practices inward disciplines, since they can be practiced alone as well as in the company of others. We attempted to draw on the best our Christian tradition has to offer. That's why we called it "Best Spiritual Practices." This summer we will widen our lens further to include corporate spiritual disciplines. We begin today with the practice of spiritual friendship. One cannot practice spiritual friendship alone. We need fellow believers to practice this discipline. Do you have faith friends in your life? Do you have Christian soul mates? If you answer this question in the negative, we urge you to become more intentional this summer about making faith friends.

Jesus says something profound about friends in John's gospel. He announces to his disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer, because a servant does not know what the master is doing" (John 15:15). A servant is simply told what to do, no questions asked. "Instead I have called you friends for everything that I have learned from my father I have made known for you." A friend is someone taken into

your confidence. This is precisely what Jesus does in the latter stages of his ministry. He takes the disciples into his confidence by telling them about his impending trial and execution in Jerusalem.

The book of Proverbs offers great insight into this matter of friendship. Proverbs is packed with pithy, practical maxims on all aspects of human life, including friendship. I find at least three aspects of friendship from Proverbs.

First, in true friendship we are loved unconditionally. Proverbs warns us about fair weather friends, who befriend us when it serves their best interests (19:4-7). One proverb comes to mind: "Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than a brother" (18:24).

Second, in true friendship, we are supported implicitly. We read in Proverbs, "A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity" (17:17). True friends don't vaporize when adversity strikes.

Nineteenth century British novelist Mary Ann Evans, better known by the male pen name George Eliot so she would be taken seriously, wrote about friendship: "Oh, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take

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and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.”

Third, in true friendship, we are told the truth fearlessly. “Iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens the wits of another” (27:17). Or consider this proverb: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (27:6). Our friends see the best in us as well as call forth the best from us.

An ancient Silicean proverb says it well: “A friend is someone who tells you when your face is dirty.” Suppose you have a piece of spinach stuck to your teeth. Mere acquaintances won’t dare say anything; friends will!

Earlier in the year, we preached a sermon series from Paul’s letter to the Colossians. We didn’t bother to talk about the names catalogued at the end of the letter. After all, it’s just a laundry list of names. I came back to these names this week in connection to this sermon on friendship. This roll call of friends teaches us important lessons about the role of friends in Paul’s life. Allow me to review the list and make a few concluding observations.

Tychicus is described in verse 7 as a dear brother who serves as one of Paul’s traveling companion during his missionary journeys (Acts 20:4). Paul trusts Tychicus so much that he commissions him to hand deliver letters to the

churches in Colossae and Ephesus as well as to a slave owner named Philemon.

Tychicus is accompanied by a former runaway slave named Onesimus in verse 9. Onesimus had become a believer in his fugitive state, whom Paul sends back to his owner with a letter that bears the owner’s name. This letter, called Philemon, is included in the New Testament.

Aristarchus, in verse 10, also serves as one of Paul’s traveling companions (Acts 19:28). Paul’s reference to Aristarchus as a fellow prisoner implies he shares a jail cell with Paul. Incidentally, a word to expectant parents: if you’re looking for novel names for children, Colossians 4 is loaded with possibilities.

John Mark’s name, in verse 10, is instructive for our purposes here. Paul and John Mark have a falling out that becomes so contentious that they end up parting company (Acts 15:37). The presence of John Mark’s name on this list indicates they have reconciled. In fact, when Paul nears the end of his life, he asks specifically for John Mark to join him (2 Timothy 4:11).

The reference to a man named Jesus, also called Justin in verse 11, reminds us that Jesus was a common first century name. The Hebrew equivalent of the name is Joshua or Jeshua. We know nothing about this man.

***When we treat each other as friends, Christ's mission advances.***

***When we gossip and malign each other, the cause of Christ suffers.***

Ephaphras, in verse 12, is pre-sent with Paul when he writes his Colossian letter. He's also described as someone who "wrestles in prayer for you." He's also mentioned at other strategic points in the letter (1:7) leading scholars to speculate that Ephaphras may be the founder of this Colossian Church.

Luke, who is described by Paul in verse 14 as a beloved physician, is responsible for the gospel that bears his name as well as the Acts of the Apostles. Thirty percent of the New Testament is attributable to this man. Demas, in verse 14, is described in another letter by Paul as someone who deserts him (2 Timothy 4:10). Nympha, in verse 15, the only woman on the list, hosts a church in her home. When we speak of 1<sup>st</sup> century churches, bear in mind churches were gatherings of people who met in people's homes. Finally, in verse 17, we have an enigmatic message to a soldier named Archippus.

The people on this list share an intimacy of heart and a communion of soul with Paul. This bond of Christ transcends race and class divisions. This list includes Gentile as well as Jewish believers. There was a time in Paul's life when he persecuted Gentile Christians. His list also obliterates distinctions based on class and economic status. One on the list is a physician, the other is a slave. Paul never refers to Onesimus as a slave but only as a dear brother. His slave status is considered extraneous. Human distinctions of ethnicity, class and social status are irrelevant in the kingdom of God.

Colossians 4 reminds us that the church is not fundamentally bricks and mortar but people in a complex network of human relationships. His letter begins with big theological constructs, topics like the cosmic scope of Christ's ministry and its implications for believers, but it ends with a grocery list of names. These names reinforce that Christ accomplishes his mission through concrete, everyday relationships. When we treat each other as friends, Christ's mission advances. When we gossip and malign each other, the cause of Christ suffers.

Friendship, as you can see by the list, is messy business. Eight of the people on this list appear to maintain lifelong friendships with Paul. One, John Mark, has a major rift with Paul. Somewhere near the end of their lives, they reconcile. Another one, Demas, deserts Paul altogether, and there is no hint of them ever coming back together.

When you are burned by someone, you might wonder whether friendship is worth the trouble. We will all fail each other, sooner or later. The only one who never fails us is Christ. Friendship is a messy business but, then again, the pain is worth the effort. "I no longer call you servants," Jesus said. "Instead I call you friends."