

“Belong”

Genesis 1: 26—31, John 15: 9—17

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Why do people binge watch TV shows? They have a yearning for community. You can see it when you look at the list of the most popular television shows over the last half century. You see the pattern: Seinfeld; I Love Lucy; The Andy Griffith Show; The Mary Tyler Moore Show; Modern Family; Big Bang Theory; Friends. Or Cheers, where the show starts with the song: “Where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came.”

They are all stories about diverse people, who overcome their diversity to become friends. Today, the whole concept of binge watching TV shows is that people start to think of the characters on TV as their friends, their community. There is a deep yearning for community.

And yet today, with people spending significant amounts of time binge-watching their on-line “friends,” they are also spending less in face-to-face interactions required of real, deep friendships.

People yearn for Friendship. Community. It is one of life’s greatest goods. The book of Genesis says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” And then, according to Genesis chapter 1, God created the human beings. Male and female God created them, in the image of God. This theological statement has been foundational for concepts of the inherent dignity of the individual, and concepts of human rights. Each of us individually is created in the image of God.

And yet there is something more profound in that statement that we tend to miss. We are created in the image of God, not individually, but together. That is what Genesis says. Together, they make up the image of God. One only understands the image of God when you see them together. It is a social image. From the beginning, we have been created for community. When the human beings stop that connection, the creation begins to fall apart.

Aristotle did his classic study of ethics, *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Aristotle puts the most important ideal of ethics – the top of the pyramid --as friendship. If you want to be ethical, you have to understand friendship.

And yet for as important as friendship and community have been then and ever since, there has been relatively little written about friendship. Recently, social scientists have started to research friendship. They have found that friendships are on the decline.

Americans surveyed appear to have one-third fewer close friends and confidants than 30 years ago. It is a sign people may be living lonelier, more isolated lives than in the past. When people report about

friends to whom they could confide confidential information, they used to say they had 3 such friends. Today they say, 2. Except for the 25% of people who say they have no close confidants at all.

One study (Ortberg, Harvard) tracked the lives of over 7,000 people over nine years, and found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections.

Another study found that people who had bad health habits (such as smoking, poor diet, alcohol use) but who had strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words, it's better to eat Twinkies with friends than broccoli alone. I may be overstating that.

Another study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association saw that, among 276 people infected with a virus of the common cold, people with strong emotional connections did four times better fighting off the illness than those who were isolated (Ortberg, John, 2008, 4/1).

Good habits are spread by social relationships. If your best friend has a healthy diet, you are five times more likely to have a healthy diet. If your best friend is not physically active, you are also likely to not be active.

Harvard's Robert Putnam notes that, after retirement, if you belong to no social groups, but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half."

The Gallop Organization did a lot of research on people in their work places and found that, if someone has a best friend at work, they were more likely to receive praise; more likely to be encouraged in their development; more likely to feel that their job is important; more likely to feel as if their opinions count at work. In short, they felt more engaged at work because they had a friend there. "Investing in friendships lead to higher levels of well-being." (Gallup Business Journal, May 26, 1999).

It matters that we strengthen the friendships in our lives. It has an impact on our physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Even on our physical health.

Modern day sociologist (John Lochs) was doing research with 4-year old children. He would put two children in a room together to study their verbal fluency. He was surprised by the number of times one child would say to the other, "Do you want to be my friend?" (De-Voicing of Society, p. 36)

Which is touching. It touches our hearts with something deep to hear it put in such vulnerable terms: Do you want to be my friend?

The vision of the Bible starts out in Genesis with an ideal of human beings created to be in community: in relationship with God and in relationship with each other. We are created for community. A sense of belonging gives us a mutual sharing: a depth of life in relationships that far outweighs the individual alone. You feel more alive when you share life with someone.

When you share it with a friend.

Theologian Edward Farley calls this connection with another person the inter-human connection." A place where we experience: recognition, empathy, compassion, dialogue, delight. In short, we come to experience, "the otherness of the other." We come to see ourselves and others less as things to be used, and more as mysteries in which we experience joy and delight.

Jesus talks about his disciples, after all he has taught them, as friends. In that, he has shown them about sacrifice. Look at what they have experienced:

To care to the point of healing;

To give to the point of miracles;

To forgive to the point of transformation;

To stop thinking about ourselves alone,
and start seeing others in deep relation,
as sisters and brothers; friends.

To love to the point where we experience heaven on earth.

If discipleship is about love in action, then the church needs to be an incubator for belonging. And real love requires sacrificial love – in ways large and small. Friendship takes risk. Part of that sacrifice is giving time to build relationships. It also takes commitment to have friendships. And that is a real challenge for people like us who live in a culture that is allergic to commitment.

Christ invites us to grow into that Spirit. To share it with other Christians until we experience church as that group of friends who love so profoundly that they come to remind us of Jesus.

The flip side is that the commitment to friendships sets us free. Caught up in God, we no longer have to worry about defending ourselves. We are embraced by Christ, as we are embraced by other Christians. It sets us free to embrace other people outside the church, without fear. Connected and accepted by God and one another, we are set free to accept anyone. It creates a warmer, more loving world.

As theologian Jurgen Moltmann says, "We are not forced to hold fast to ourselves or to our image and appearance. We are already held." (The Passion for Life, p. 32).

Belonging to a Congregation does not mean being just a name on the church rolls. It means growing in being one of those friends of Jesus.

So that: No one is alone with his or her problems.

No one has to conceal who they are.

Everyone has something to say, and is worth hearing.

No one is isolated or ignored.

Everyone feels valued.

We even may disagree, but we bear with each other.

We can have peace, even without agreement, because we are, in the deepest sense, friends.

When Genesis says, "It is not good for human beings to be alone," it means that human beings were created for community. When Jesus calls his disciples friends, he means we can understand the closeness of Christ as we learn to be friends with one another. We want to BELONG with one another. It is how we BELONG to God.

People are yearning for a deeper sense of connection. It is why we create spaces for people to get together among the people of the church in Friendship Groups, Study Groups, Cycling Group, Mission Group, Travel Group, Support Groups, Choirs and more. A church is only as strong as our friendships. It matters that each of us make a priority of growing, nurturing those friendships. And starting new friendships.

It makes us all healthier, more engaged, more fulfilled, more filled with joy. It is a crucial part of working with God to experience the fullness of God's grace.

In the Tom Hanks movie *Castaway*, this time crunching, always on the move, overly busy man is in an airplane crash, and ends up on an island alone for 4 years. His need for friendship is so great he starts talking to his volleyball.

That's his story. What's your story? Have you started talking to volleyballs lately? Have you made creating new friendships a priority?

Friends become part of the story of our lives. In the story of our lives, friends help us to see the wonder and joy of everyday things. Friends help us to question the direction we have been going. Sometimes friends help us rewrite the story of our lives. And when tragedies come, friends are the ones who help us finally start living again. Living into God's tomorrow.

The Bible says it so profoundly.
It is not good for human beings to be alone.
We are created for community.
Jesus says, "I have called you friends."

Let's make that a priority.