

My name is JR. and I'm the teaching pastor here. I've been following Jesus for about 25 years now. And while life with God feels second-nature to me today, when I first chose to follow, it was a bit like my honeymoon in Mexico.

My wife Amanda is fluent in Spanish. I am not. I took Latin in grad school, so I can make out some words here and there, but I'm worthless in a conversation, in asking for directions or ordering food (unless I can point at a menu) or really anything useful.

We went to Puerto Vallarta for our honeymoon, so we were deep into Mexico. And everywhere we went, I was sort of hopeless. I would stand and smile, desperately grasping for a vague sense of the conversation while Amanda chatted away at warp speed with whomever we were talking.

The Mexicans were captivated by my tall, blond American wife who spoke beautiful Spanish. Their eyes lit up and they'd lean in to the conversation, fully engaged. They offered her travel tips, local secrets and free stuff, shout, Eh, Rubia, Rubia! (blonie, blondie!) when she came near.

All anyone ever offered me was to sell me some pot (which accurately sums up how people still look at the two of us).

I would've had a totally different experience in Mexico without Amanda. I would've been lost, uncomfortable, nervous. But she knew the language, the culture. She helped me acclimate, to learn my way around. She taught me some of the basic vocabulary.

My experience in Mexico is a lot like many of your experiences with Church. Like my relationship with Spanish, most of you are at least vaguely familiar with Church language. You know what a soul is, prayer and sin. You may even have vague conceptions of salvation or grace. Know some Bible stories.

But you come into a space like this and you feel out of place, out of your depth. Overwhelmed. This is really different from what's out there, in your ordinary life. What helps is a friend, a translator, if you will, to help you connect to the Church, to help you engage more fully with the God who's already working in your life.

That's what we're talking about today: the art of sacred friendship.

This month marks the 60th year this particular community has been gathering as a church. And in light of that milestone, we've been dreaming about the future of Beaver Creek Church of the Nazarene, asking, What's next for us?

We believe the answer to that question is this statement: We will **Be the Church that connects with and engages the unchurched in our neighborhoods**. The first two weeks of this month, we talked about what it means to Be the Church, to be a community of people who is being formed into a faithful representation of Jesus.

So today, we're going to talk about what it means to **connect with the unchurched** [**highlight this in the slide?**]. And before we move very far at all, I want to clarify this word "unchurched". The staff and leadership of our church spent a lot of time wrestling with this word. It's easy to

hear pejorative undertones, as though "churched people" - which is us - are clearly better than "unchurched people".

But we chose the word 'unchurched' for its descriptive properties, as much for what it *doesn't* say as what it does. According to census data, 45,000 persons within 5 miles of our building are not connected to a faith community. They are literally unchurched.

But observing behavior (these persons don't participate in a Church) isn't commenting on spiritual condition: we're not dividing Beavercreek into 'saints and sinners' or 'lost and saved'. Because that's not up to us. How could I possibly know the spiritual condition of a person I've never met? How could I discern whether the guy in front of me at Kroger has a relationship with God, or what that relationship looks like?

That's why we chose to use the word 'unchurched': we want to connect with those who don't participate in a faith community. Some follow Jesus; some don't. Some pray; some don't. Some would consider themselves 'lost'; others don't.

We don't want to guess at someone's spiritual state. That's not our call. When we talk about people having a relationship with God, we're not in a position to control that. Every person's journey of faith is their own. We can't say, Our mission is to rescue lost people! because only the Holy Spirit can do that.

We don't save anyone. Only God saves.

And yet we are the Church. We are the Body of Christ. So what is our job? We can't start someone's relationship with God, but we can set up the first date. And we do that by embracing the world, by befriending the world.

That might sound strange to many of us, whether we're churched or unchurched. Because for a lot of years, the Church has kept ourselves separate from the world. Our denomination - the Church of the Nazarene - has a history of separateness from the world. We've broken our lives into "sacred" and "secular". There's Church stuff and World stuff. [introduce the map with things split up]

But that sharp divide isn't how God teaches us to engage the World. One of the most famous bible verses in the world reveals God's attitude toward the world:

God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

God *loves* the world. So much that he became *part* of the world. This is divine embrace! The next verse is even more telling:

God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. -- John 3:16-17

Why did God come into the world? Not to judge or condemn the world. But to rescue the world. God didn't remain separate from the world. God dove into the midst of us. Was Jesus different

from the people around him? Unquestionably. That's what drew everyone to him. But different and separate aren't the same. [easy pic here: separate vs. different in the midst]

That's why our new vision begins with Be the Church: we will be a people who looks like Jesus, and therefore unlike the world around us. Because we pursue our spiritual formation, we will be different. Not weird, but different.

A Church that pursues difference rather than separation doesn't look like what we expect. Because our lives aren't divided so neatly anymore. It's not us vs. them. It's not in here vs. out there. It's not lost vs. saved. When we do Church like that, sharing Jesus with people is forced. We don't go Out There usually, so we have to come up with programs and formulas that make sense. We have to learn how to talk to Them because we've developed our own language in here. [bring the separate map back up, because we're going to flip it]

We could imagine the same sort of separation - between us and them - as the problem God faced, if we rotate our brains. God is in Heaven, we are on Earth. God vs. the World. But in that scenario, God didn't stay up in Heaven sending out memos and tracts to invite us up there.

God came to us [the "different" map probably with an arrow or something]. This is what we call the Incarnation: God becoming human, taking on flesh. This is God not remaining separate from the world, but *embracing* us. This is divine friendship, leaving the comfort of home to embrace the Other.

In fact, this is the heart of the Good News Jesus came to announce. A follower of Jesus called John described God's embrace of the world like this in his first letter:

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

Jesus demonstrated how much God loves the world. Our relationship with God began not when we chose God, but when God chose us. And that has huge implications for *how* we follow God. John goes on to say:

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. -- 1 John 4:9-12

If we want to follow God, if we want to present a faithful picture of God to the World, then it's not by staying away. It's by embracing the world, offering friendship to those who are not like us. We announce to those who are far from God the good news that God has chosen them. The creator of the universe offers them friendship.

How else does any of us come to Jesus? I know that's what my journey looks like:

I was fortunate to be raised by two parents who loved me and loved God, in a church community who really loved God too. I tell you that to tell you this: my decision to follow Jesus was not theologically informed. I hadn't memorized any bible verses or probably even ever read the Bible

at that point. I'm sure I knew some of the Bible stories we teach kids, like Noah's Ark and David and Goliath and Jonah and the Whale. But none of that actually factored in to my decision to follow Jesus.

Rather, I was surrounded by people who loved me, who told me God loved me. And I believed them because I experienced *their* love. I knew people who loved me like they loved me wouldn't lie about something that big.

My decision to choose God wasn't based on facts and figures and spreadsheets and complicated arguments. It was based on the conviction that God had already chosen me, that God had embraced me long before I could even understand who God *is*. My choice to follow Jesus was nothing more than a response to that embrace, and it grew from my participation in the larger community of my church.

In a way, my parents and church acted as translators, who helped me understand who God is and what God has done for me. Helped me learn to speak God's language, to discern God working in my life.

And it all happened in the context of friendship, of embrace. I came to know love by experiencing love. Sacred friendship is how God invites us into new life.

If you were raised around a Church that shared God through tracts and random drop-in visits, that probably sounds like a cop-out. You're thinking, really man? You're saying all we do is be friends with people? Sounds like you're just scared of having a real conversation with someone. Embarrassed to bring up spiritual things in conversation.

But I suspect those reactions have more to do with a misunderstanding of friendship than anything else. In that same John's story about Jesus, he recounts Jesus' last meeting with his first followers, the night before he was executed. During that meeting, Jesus says the same thing we heard earlier:

**This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.**

**There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.**

**You didn't choose me. I chose you. -- John 15:12-16a**

Jesus says, This thing we've been doing together? It's called friendship. I invited you into my life, let you see what God is doing. I've come to you, become one of you, and I'm giving my whole self for you. You're not slaves, not robots I command and control. You're friends. I've shared my most intimate secrets with you. You know everything about me. And this friendship has become an invitation to share in my life.

Through Jesus himself, we see friendship is the ultimate announcement of the Good News about God. Through our friendships with those outside the Church, we invite them to see what God is doing in their lives, and to participate with God in bringing life and hope to a dying world.

This can be scarier than the tracts and bullhorns method of sharing about God. I'm sure a few of you are thinking, Sure, the crazy extroverted guy on stage wants us all to go be friends with everyone. Sounds fine for him. But I can't do that. You introverts out there know what I mean right?

By the way, if you don't know what I'm talking about: extroverts get their energy from being around people; introverts get their energy from being alone. It has nothing to do with social vs. antisocial or fun vs. boring. Think of it this way: you have the choice tonight between either a) going to a birthday party where there're going to be about 50 people all coming and going throughout the night or b) hanging out with two friends, maybe making dinner together or playing board games. If you're an extrovert, the party sounds like a better plan. If you're an introvert, the quieter night with a couple of friends is the way to go.

So introverts hear "Go be friends with everyone" and they get anxious. But that's not what I'm saying. I'm talking about the friendships you already have: these are the opportunities to cultivate, to deepen. And you introverts are naturally good at deep relationships. They give you energy. You crave them.

Extroverts, this is actually harder for us. Deep, intimate relationships come less naturally to us; we tend to go wide rather than deep, have lots of friends rather than a few close ones. So if we're going to have these God-like friendships, we will have to focus, be more intentional about spending more time with fewer persons, really investing ourselves in those deep relationships.

And whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, this is scary. Because letting people into your life makes us vulnerable. Some of us are thinking, But I don't *want* people to see *my* life as an invitation to join God. My life *isn't* an invitation. I'm not good enough.

But that's the beauty of putting formation first. We are all on a journey toward God. We're all at different points along the way. And the best invitation you can offer someone is to let them see your journey, warts and all. Let them see your successes *and* your failures. Because that's where God's power is truly on display. When someone can see how God is transforming you, how the Holy Spirit is shaping you into a person who looks more and more like Jesus, God becomes all the more real.

When they see how you embrace them, warts and all, it's easier for them to understand how God could embrace them. Because God embraces our friends when we embrace our friends.

This is ultimately why real friendship is so much scarier than bullhorns and tracts. Those kind of sharing about Jesus keep you at arm's length from people. You're detached. You're just sharing information. If someone rejects information it doesn't hurt that much.

But friendship is risky. When you share your *life* with someone, you open yourself up. When someone rejects your life, they're rejecting *you*. Embracing someone leaves us vulnerable and exposed. Embrace opens us to pain and hurt. [\[show with arms open\]](#) That's why it's so scary.

And yet again this is what we see in Jesus, our example. Jesus embraced us and we responded with rejection, by killing him. But God's embrace is bigger than our rejection. God turned our refusal into our rescue. Jesus' death and resurrection is the very place we find our new life.

In Jesus' death and resurrection we also find our courage to embrace the world around us. We will not continue to perpetuate a church that remains separate from the world. We choose to embrace the world because God embraces the world.

I did not choose God. God chose me.

You did not choose God. God chose you.

You are the Body of Jesus. You are the picture of Jesus for the 45,000 around us. Whom you find, God finds. Whom you embrace, God embraces. [the 'different' pic, with an embrace this time]

We will not treat our neighbors, our coworkers, our family members as projects. We choose to risk because they are and shall be our friends.

We will not settle for cheap evangelism tricks and tracts and gimmicks. We will choose to be vulnerable, to share our true selves with those we love.

We will not wait for the institution of the Church to do our work for us. We will be the Church that is the body of Christ. We will be the faithful picture of Jesus our friends can see and understand.

The vast majority of you already have these relationships in your life. You live in the world. You already have neighbors and coworkers and family and acquaintances who are "unchurched", who don't participate in a faith community.

The question before you today is Do you embrace them? Will you embrace them?

**Prayer:**

Whom is God calling you to embrace?