

Welcome

A couple of years ago, a 22 year old rapper from East Harlem named Spencer Sleyon was hanging out with some friends when the conversation turned to who their best friends were. When it was Spencer's turn to share, he said, "My best friend is an 81-year-old white woman who lives in a retirement community in Florida."

It turned out, he was exaggerating... but only just a little bit. The woman in question is named Rosalind Guttman, and she and Spencer had met through Words with Friends (yeah, the cell phone game). The game randomly paired them up, and the first few dozen games were all business (er... um... all fun and games?).

Eventually, they started talking using the game's chat feature, and before long, they were discussing current events and their lives - including Spencer's plans to move to New York to pursue his music career.

[Friends] Eventually, Spencer got to go to Florida to meet Rosalind in person, and a tweet of their encounter went viral. Of course it did. We love stories of unlikely friendships, stories of people who, superficially, have little in common, but discover a common humanity.

The reality is, though, not a lot of us have these unlikely friendships. We like to read stories like that of Spencer and Rosalind but we're too busy or too isolated or too scared to reach out like Spencer did and build a friendship with someone who's not like us.

That's unfortunate because there's a reason we love stories like Spencer and Rosalind's: we were created to be in deep, intimate relationships - what we could and should call 'true friendships' - with people who aren't like us. Their story makes our spirits sing because we know at a deep level that we need that kind of relationship too.

So today, we're going to explore why friendship is essential for a life of faith. We'll see that our call to make friends is an echo of what God does for us. Jesus became one of us to make friendship with him possible. Jesus got up close and personal. By faith, we can do the same!

Message

Here at Catalyst, we always take the four weeks leading up to Advent to reflect on who we are as a Church and dream about the future. Last year, we introduced four big ideas we're organizing ourselves around moving forward. So for the next four weeks, we're going to revisit those ideas and ask two questions: What does each mean for Catalyst and what does each mean for *me* as a part of Catalyst?

This year, we're going to be exploring how each big idea is found in the life and ministry of Jesus, and we're calling the series Proximity Warning because each big idea is grounded in a close relationship to Jesus. When we draw closer to God, our lives change. Fair warning.

Today, the first big idea is Friendship. We've been talking a lot about friendship over the last year (rightfully so, if it's shaping our community)! We've said repeatedly that Friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news message - an idea that is hard for a lot of us to swallow. After all, we're taught that forgiveness is the heart of faith - that the whole reason Jesus came was to die on the cross for our sins.

Of course, it's true that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. But that's not the reason he came. If it were, he could just have popped down, died on the cross and headed back to heaven. Instead, he was born, grew up among us, taught for three years and *then* died on the cross. *Then* rose from the dead and appeared to more than 500 people before ascending to heaven.

Why? To bring us into relationship with God. To conquer the power of sin and death that has enslaved humanity. To establish God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And at the heart of all of that is, according to Jesus, *friendship*. Last year, we spent a lot of time in this statement Jesus made to his followers the night before he was killed:

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. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name. This is my command: Love each other. -- John 15:12-17

Jesus commanded us to love each other, to befriend each other. *That* is the new commandment he gave. Imagine what those first disciples felt - they'd all grown up having to memorize the Law God gave Moses, over 600 commandments. What to wear. What to eat. Who you're allowed to spend time around. And then Jesus gives a new commandment: be friends with each other.

[Scripture Slide 1] That shouldn't have come as a *huge* surprise to his disciples. After all, Jesus made friendship a central part of his earthly ministry. In fact, it was who he chose to be friends with that generated a good bit of controversy. In Matthew 11, Jesus is reflecting on the difference between himself and his cousin, John the Baptizer. John lived in the desert, ate a strict diet and was generally what we think of today as a monk - isolated and ascetic. Jesus was pretty much the opposite - he spent a *lot* of his time having public feasts with pretty much anyone who wanted to show up. The only thing Jesus and John had in common (besides some DNA) was their message: God's kingdom is at hand! Get ready!

So you'd think, if you were on board with the message, then one of those guys would appeal to you. So here, Jesus is criticizing the people who reject both him and John, because they're really rejecting *God*. It's just a couple of verses, but watch for what Jesus' reputation is:

John didn't spend his time eating and drinking, and you say, 'He's possessed by a demon.' The Son of Man, on the other hand, feasts and drinks, and you say, 'He's a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!' But wisdom is shown to be right by its results." -- Matthew 11:18-19

Jesus is the "friend of tax collectors and other sinners." That's quite the reputation for a religious leader - and Jesus is clear it was being used as a way to discredit him. "Don't listen to *that guy*... have you seen who he hangs out with?"

[Scripture Slide 2] And they weren't making it up. Jesus *regularly* made it a point to feast with people other religious folks wouldn't be caught dead with. In Jesus' day, public feasts were a big deal. Think of them sort of like an invite-only event today. Who's on the guest list tells you a lot about the status of the event, and the status of the host. The feasts like the one we see in Matthew 9 are a sort of 'who's who' of the lowest of the low in Jesus' day. It was a feast comprised of people everyone else turned their noses up at, as you can hear in the story:

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" -- Matthew 9:9-12

I love the way the NLT translates the Pharisees' words "Why does he eat with such scum?" It's clear they were disgusted by these tax collectors and other sinners. They wouldn't be caught dead at one of these feasts. And there's no way a single person at that table would be on the invite list to one of the Pharisees' feasts.

The Pharisees created a wide gulf between them and all the folks at Matthew's feast.

But Jesus didn't. He was right in the middle of the party. Smack dab in the middle of all these sinners. And it's *this* sort of behavior that got him the reputation "friend of sinners."

It's easy for that to feel... trite. Like, "that's it, Lord? That's your big plan? Be nice to each other?" That's because we too often have a shallow understanding of friendship. We settle for niceness and call it friendship. Much of what we call friendship is really acquaintance (or maybe pity). Acquaintance is relationship at arm's length. You don't have to know much about the other person. It's easy to be nice to their face while disdaining them in private. But Friendship requires us to be up close and personal. Jesus made us friends not by staying in heaven, but by becoming one of us, living with us.

Acquaintance doesn't require us to know each other's problems. I don't have to be vulnerable with you at arm's length. I can keep up my façade and you can keep up yours. Friendship requires us to be

vulnerable, to be close enough to see each other's flaws. Friendship requires us to embrace someone who isn't like us, to react with love rather than indifference or disgust.

How many people could you call at 2 am if you were in a crisis? That's a good indicator of how many friends you have.

How many people know the real you? How many people do you feel like you can be yourself around?

How many people do you make time for?

Who are your *friends*? Especially here, in the place you call your church, who are your friends?

That might sound like a strange question for some of us, because of the way we've privatized and individualized what it means to be church. For a number of us, church has long been primarily a place you come to receive teaching to become more faithful. Church is *primarily* about what happens in this room, in this preaching moment. Church is about individual growth. Friendship is optional.

What Jesus shows us is that friendship is the heart of what he's about. And friendship requires proximity. If you want to have friendships, you have to prioritize proximity. And that's not always easy.

The reason we have C-Groups is to facilitate friendships. Friendship requires us to prioritize proximity and that's exactly what C-groups enable us to do. C-Groups put us in proximity with each other. When we carve out space to sit not in rows, but in circles, when we make it a priority to *share* with each other, to be vulnerable, to accept each other as we are, to pray with and for each other, we draw close to each other. This is the fertile soil out of which friendship grows.

We're looking at some fun experiments with more opportunities for friendship in the next year, including some that involve meals. Remember: feasting together was one of the main ways Jesus made friends - it's how he got his reputation as a 'friend of sinners'.

And I want to offer you permission to do this on your own, too. You don't have to wait until C-Groups are in term, or for an official Catalyst space. You can invite someone around you out to lunch, or to grab a coffee. Take a chance and create some proximity. Look around the room - you're all here because faith is a priority for you, and friendship is the heart of faith. God brought you into this space not just to learn some more facts about God, but to become friends with God, and friends with the other folks here. We're a body, a spiritual family.

So take a risk. Invite someone to hang out. Get to know each other. Share your spiritual journeys or talk about your favorite movies or that great book you've been reading lately. It doesn't matter. Just make proximity a priority, and share who you are as you receive who *they* are.

God created us to be *together*. We can't impact our community unless we're doing it *together*. That's how God designed us to be, and it's why God came to us in the person of Jesus, to make friends with us.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus makes us friends by breaking open his very body for us.

1. What relationships in my church family are true friendships?
2. What relationships are acquaintance?
3. What is keeping me from prioritizing friendships with my church family?
4. What relationships is God calling me to move toward friendship this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Make proximity a priority this week.