

Alive and Well
Deep Spiritual Friendships

Four years ago my three brothers and I started taking a “brothers’ trip” each summer. Each year we strike the same goofy pose and take a photo; we’ve been doing taking this photo **every time** we get together since the mid-80s. Here is this year’s photo from Atlanta:



We’re always in order from oldest to youngest: Mikey, Jeffy, Stevie, and Tommy. Mikey (far right) is a lawyer and lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi where we grew up. Four years ago when our mother found out we were planning a brothers’ trip to Nashville, she commented, “I guess I’m not invited. . .” Mikey is the one who pointed out, “It’s a **brothers’** trip, Mom.” You can see why he’s good in the courtroom (keen grasp of the obvious).

Jeffy (second from the right) just retired (at age 60) from teaching in international schools. He and his wife have taught in Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Bangladesh, and (now) Vietnam. Now I think he reads about 6+ hours a day; he’s a brilliant guy. He’s going to drive our mom here to Manhattan in three weeks; you might spot them here on a Sunday morning.

Tommy (far left) is a math professor in a small liberal arts college just south of Boston. When we went to Hattiesburg after Atlanta, Tommy and I did home repairs for our mom. Five times over the course of three days people asked us, “Are y’all twins?” This happened twice in Best Buy.

We did all sorts of amazing things in Atlanta: the Center for Civil and Human Rights, Shakespeare Theatre (A Mid-Summernight’s Dream), The Varsity (world’s largest drive-up fast food restaurant), toured CNN, tried to solve a few of the world’s problems, sat around and misremembered our childhood, etc.

I love my brothers and would “do anything” for them. But I would also affirm the truth of Proverbs 18:24.

24 A man of too many friends comes to ruin,
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

I have friends who are much more influential in my life than my brothers on a day to day basis. My friends know 10x more about my heart and my soul than my brothers do. Part of it is geographical; I’m thousands of miles away from my brothers, but my friends are ten minutes away. And part of it is commonality, especially spiritually; my brothers and I are in very different places spiritually, but my closest spiritual friends share my desire to know Christ. And they have an intense desire to help me know Christ.

We are in the midst of a sermon series we've entitled "Alive and Well." We're discussing how to thrive in some of the core relationships in our lives. Last week Sam talked about "steadfast love" (*hesed*) as the foundation of a biblical friendship. He mentioned that friends "clearly love and care for each other, and yet have no official obligation to do so." In other words, we get to choose our friends. You can't choose your brothers and sisters or your parents; you can't even choose your brothers and sisters in Christ. But you can choose your friends. Friendships are *preferential relationships*. Your friends are the people you prefer to spend time with because of common interests, personality, shared convictions, or some other intangible.

Today we are going to continue talking about such friendships, ones that are distinctively Christ-centered. One of our values at Faith is "authentic community." When we describe authentic community, we highlight the importance of spiritual friendship in our lives:

God created us to live in community with one another. We seek to cultivate deep spiritual friendships and other healthy relationships of accountability, belonging, and care.

The fact that you and I need other people in our lives is not some flaw; it is God's design. God created us to live in community with one another. Therefore, we don't try to live the Christian life in isolation from other believers. We reject the way of thinking that says, "If I were mature and spiritual-minded, I wouldn't need other people . . . Jesus and me would be enough." Actually deep spiritual friendships are not only a source of pleasure and joy; they are also a safety net spiritually and emotionally and mentally. Sometimes spiritual friendships are the only thing that keeps you tethered to Christ and the Church when you're full of doubt, temptation, or despair.

Therefore, "we seek to cultivate deep spiritual friendships." We aren't passive in this process. We don't sit at home helplessly wondering why we don't have more friends. We actively pursue deep spiritual friendships. This will require a vision for friendships (which Sam discussed last week) and a commitment to invest deeply in our friends.

Next week we're going to talk about "other healthy relationships of accountability, belonging, and care." Biblically speaking, we need relationships beyond deep spiritual friendships. We need the broader body of Christ. As we'll discuss next week, there are 39 "one-anothers" in the New Testament that we live out in the broader community of faith. Friendships should not become exclusive and cliquish; they should be cultivated in the broader context of the larger body of Christ and in the world.

This morning I'd like to talk about a progression in "cultivating deep spiritual friendships." We will first talk about ***finding*** (or recognizing) spiritual friendships. Then we'll discuss ***deepening*** spiritual friendships.

Finding (or recognizing) spiritual friendship. Some people seem to make friends effortlessly; for whatever reason, others need to be more intentional. Here are a couple of suggestions for finding spiritual friendship.

Ask God to give you spiritual friendships. There are a couple of biblical principles behind this suggestion. The first is that friendships are a gift, which by definition is something that you don't earn or deserve. Your paycheck isn't a gift; you don't tell your boss, "It was so thoughtful of you to put money into my account again this month." No, you've got a right to that money because you earned it. Friendships don't fall into that category. Friendships are pure grace. And we learn in James 1:17 that all good gifts come from God.

17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

If you've got something good in your life - health, relationships, peace, joy, food, clothing, shelter - it is ultimately a gift of God. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from our heavenly Father. God is a Father who knows how to give good gifts to His children.

Throughout the Bible we see that God wants people to ask for the good gifts that He wants to give. We find this in Matthew 6 Jesus tells His followers not to be like "the Gentiles" (people who don't know the God of Israel) who use meaningless repetition, thinking that they can wear God out by being verbose or by repeating some magical words over and over. Jesus said, "Do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8). Jesus' logic isn't that since God knows our needs we ***don't need to ask***; His logic is that since God knows our needs we ***can and should ask with confidence!*** We aren't trying to convince a stingy, reluctant God to give us something He doesn't want to give. Rather, we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread (which you already know we need)."

Applied to today's topic, it would be very appropriate to pray, "Heavenly Father, please give me the gift of deep spiritual friendship." As James 4:2 suggests, let it not be said that we "do not have" spiritual friendships because we "do not ask" for them. Of course praying for a spiritual friendship isn't merely mouthing the words. Praying involves wanting something you believe is the will of God so deeply that you cry out to God to supply it. I would ask you directly, do you want deep spiritual friendships? Or not? If you do, the place to start is by asking God to supply.

A dynamic at play in this is that if you ask God to give you a friend and He does, you will recognize that friendship as a precious gift; you'll be much less likely to take your friend for granted or to treat that friend as a coincidental acquaintance.

Be the friend you want. This is an application of the "golden rule" which Jesus taught in Matthew 7:12. Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives a very simply, yet profound principle that should govern how treat others:

12 “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

If you want a summary of how the Hebrew Scriptures advocate treating others, this is it. As He did throughout His teachings, Jesus inverts the way we normally think and act. We normally think, “I am going to treat others the way they treat me,” or “I am going to treat others the way they deserve to be treated.” If somebody insults me, I’m going to ignore them or insult them in return. Instead, Jesus tells us to consider, “How would I want to be treated in this situation?” If I wouldn’t want to be insulted or belittled, I shouldn’t treat others that way.

It seems to me that the golden rule provides pathway for making or recognizing friends. As you get to know people who might possibly become spiritual friends, treat them the way you would want a good friend to treat you. ***Be the friend you want.*** You could think about this in terms of specific behaviors or in terms of virtues. For example, here at Faith you might meet a potential friend in a life group or on a ministry team or here in worship on a Sunday morning. A place to begin is by treating that person the way you’d like to be treated in a friendship.

If you desire to have a friend who is genuinely concerned about the details of your life, be interested in the details of his/her life. I can think of a budding friendship a few years ago in which another man spent two or three hours asking me questions and being interested in me and my story.

If you desire to have a friend that is generous to you in terms of time and resources, begin showing generosity to that person. If you know the person is going through a tough time, ask “Is there anything I can do for you? How can I be praying for you?” And then pray and follow up to see how the person is doing.

You get the idea. Instead of waiting for a fully mature friendship to appear out of nothing, begin treating the person like you want to be treated. Be the friend you want. I’d encourage you to let God surprise you with friendships. He might give you a friend that’s very different from you in terms of career, education, age, interests, etc.

Deepening spiritual friendships. (Psalm 41:9, Matthew 26:50, 1 Peter 1:22-23)

Before we talk about deepening spiritual friendships, I think it’s important to acknowledge that you’re taking a risk pursuing such friendships.

We see failed friendships in numerous places in Scripture. In Psalm 41:9, David laments:

9 Even my close friend in whom I trusted,
Who ate my bread,
Has lifted up his heel against me.

David brought to mind a close friend, someone in whom he trusted, somebody who sat in his house and ate his food. They had shared table fellowship which signified relationship and acceptance. Yet now this “friend” lifted up his heel against David.

Because a friendship is a preferential relationship, not obligatory, it was all the more painful for David to have a friend who betrayed him.

The gospel of Matthew records Judas' betrayal of Jesus in this way:

48 Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him." 49 Immediately Judas went to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. 50 And Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him.

By calling Judas "friend" Jesus was highlighting the depth of Judas' betrayal. It was bad enough that Judas was acting like Jesus' enemy; worse was the fact that he was betraying One who had related to him as a friend.

I mention these examples to remind us that there is no guarantee that our current friends will always be friends. It is possible a friend will betray you due to no fault of your own. I have lost a number of deep, spiritual friendships over the years due to carelessness, disagreements, and sin. I want us to pursue deep spiritual friendships with our "eyes wide open." We need to be mindful that such relationships require effort and commitment. You are taking a risk if you pursue deep spiritual friendships. At times you will wonder if it's more trouble than it's worth.

But biblically and experientially I would tell you with great confidence, "Yes, it is worth it. We were created to live in community. Therefore, we should pursue deep spiritual friendships." Such friendships are worth the risk because they have the potential to be life-giving and life-saving. Sooner or later there will come a time in your life when you need a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

How do you pursue this type of deep spiritual friendship? Basically we cultivate spiritual friendships by being the best brother or sister in Christ possible. Invest time, resources, and energy in your friendships. Don't coast; don't assume that good friendships are effortless or easy because they're often not. Next week we'll talk about our responsibility to practice the one-anothers broadly in the body of Christ. But our most intentional and intense expressions of the one-anothers should be in our deep, spiritual friendships.

For example, in 1 Peter 1:22-23 Peter writes:

22 Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, 23 for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.

The reason you can/should "fervently love one another from the heart" is because you are a new creation in Christ and you legitimately have something to offer. When you believe the gospel, you have "purified your souls" so that you have the capacity to love others "sincerely" (i.e., without hypocrisy); you love others the way you've been loved by Jesus. Peter also mentions that you've been "born again." Whereas you were dead in

your sin, you are now fully alive in Christ. You bring that life to your friendships. This means that ultimately your friends experience through you Jesus Himself. You want for your friends what Jesus wants for them; you say to them what you understand Jesus would want for them; you do for them what Jesus would do for them. This love is reciprocal: you love **one another**.

This means that there will be times when love demands that you and your friends will admonish (warn) one another (Romans 15:14). You will say, "I see something in your life that concerns me." It could be an attitude or a habit or a pattern of speaking. You can admonish friends because they trust you; they know you are "for" them; you are a safe person. If you try to admonish someone who doesn't know or trust you, they will think you're being mean or judgmental. But friends have this freedom to speak the truth in love. It's not always easy, but it's possible.

I can think of numerous times when my closest friends have urged me to do the right thing in situations when I didn't feel like it. Deep spiritual friendships aren't a luxury for me; they are a necessity. Deep spiritual friendships aren't icing on the cake for me. . . they are part of the cake. I don't even want to think about where I'd be if I didn't have friends whom I trust more than I trust myself. I can remember times when I've been able to lay out a difficult situation for a friend and ask, "How should I think and feel about this situation? Am I thinking about this correctly or not?" I can remember times when my friend told me, "I think you misspoke or mistreated that person." Other times my friend says, "That's not your problem; that's the other person's responsibility to address." I'm being vague here, but hopefully you hear me saying that sometimes I trust my friend more than I trust myself. I am a better man for it.

The point is that deep spiritual friendships should make us more like Christ. This means, among other things, that these friendships should never become cliquish or exclusive. It's true that you can only have a few deep spiritual friendships. But our friendships should never give the impression, "We only care about our small circle of friends and nobody else." No, Christ-centered spiritual friendships should expand our capacity to love others. Our friendships should make us more compassionate and more generous toward others.

I'll close by reading an account of a deep spiritual friendship by Gordon MacDonald. In 2004 he wrote *A Resilient Life* about a trip he took three years earlier. MacDonald would have been about 62 years old and his friend Al Napolitano would have been about 72.

There will be few memories in my life more precious than a long hike I took three years ago in the Swiss Alps with Al and two others. . . .

The trail we took that day ended up to be far longer and more difficult than any of us had anticipated. It was about halfway along the pathway when we realized that Al, ten years older than the rest of us, had become seriously exhausted. There was a considerable distance yet to walk before we might find shelter, and I began to worry. Al had suffered from some serious heart problems a few years back and I was concerned that we had unwittingly put him in a dangerous situation.

I suggested that the other two of our four-man group hike on ahead and find a place where we might spend the night. Al and I would continue walking, but at a much reduced pace.

I said to Al, "We'll take a hundred steps and rest. A hundred more steps and rest. If we are going uphill, you lead. If we're going downhill, I'll lead." We agreed and started on our way. Even with our sequence of a hundred steps and a rest, the way became more and more difficult.

Soon we were walking arm in arm, as if one of us was ushering the other down a church aisle. We prayed together, told stories to each other, and whispered words of encouragement. In this fashion we made our way forward until, as darkness fell, we reached the [mountain hotel] our friends had found for us. That walk brought me as close to the heart of another man as I have ever experienced.

That's a great picture of a deep spiritual friendship - someone who won't leave you behind (in any sense), someone who will walk arm in arm with you when you're weak, someone who will take a hundred steps and then rest. . . a hundred steps and rest. We seek to cultivate deep spiritual friendships because such relationships are part of God's design and have the potential to be both life-giving and life-saving.