

Why Christian Men Need Christian Male Friends: calling men out of isolation and into vital friendships

(talk given at men's breakfast held at Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma WA on May 8, 2010)

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Hebrews 10:24-25

Thank you for giving up sleep and other pursuits this Sat morning to be with the brethren and learn more about *Pursuing Christ in Community: Discipleship through Friendships*

Now that your stomachs' appetites have been filled with great food, I want to stimulate your spiritual appetites for closer, more meaningful relationships with other Christian men.

Can you identify the author of this quote? "*The deepest need of man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness.*" (Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 1956; for those of you who attended the Calvin tour last year, Fromm studied at the Univ of Heidelberg, and moved to Geneva in 1935 when anti-Semitism was on the rise in Hitler's Germany.)

I wish to begin our consideration of male friendships this morning by reading the opening paragraph of an article entitled *Male Intimacy* that appeared in Touchstone Magazine in 2001...

"The above words of Erich Fromm, the eminent German psychoanalyst, poignantly points out the longing of the human heart for connection. Despite the yearning for deeper connection, real intimacy often eludes many men. In my work with men as a psychologist, chaplain, and addictions counselor, I have come to believe that while men do long for deeper connections, they often feel lost as to how to go about enhancing their relational lives. When performing a task that requires clear goals and objectives, men feel on familiar ground, but intimacy, the kind that challenges us as men to reveal our inmost self to another, that is scary and uncharted territory." (Kevin McClone, M. Div, Psy.D)

For those of you who may already be "weirded out" by the word "Intimacy", perhaps we should start with a definition. In this day and age, sex-saturated that it is, it is necessary to point out that the word *intimate* in the context of this discussion has nothing to do with physical relations; instead, it refers to a high degree of honesty and openness between two people as they relate to each other; sharing from the heart, not content to have conversation at only a superficial level.

Let me say upfront that this pursuit of close (dare I say, *intimate*) male friendships requires a counter-cultural, biblically-inspired mindset, and does not come easily or naturally to most 21st century American males. But if you are willing to put forth some prayer and effort in this regard, you will not be disappointed.

I will begin broadly by speaking of the **universal benefits of friendships**. One needn't be a Christian, after all, to have friends and enjoy the benefits of those friendships. **But for the Christian man,**

friendships are much more critical, and potentially more rewarding, than for the non-Christian man.

Why? Because friendships between Christians are the best means of spurring one another on to love and good works., which is the essence of discipleship.

Let's be honest: in isolation we tend to lovers of self more than lovers of God or others, but when we are in communion with the brethren, that is when we prove that we are truly disciples of Jesus Christ.

Disclaimers...

- 1st disclaimer: although it is true that throughout one's appointed lifespan, there is always a need from some degree of male friendship, the need is felt more acutely at different life stages than at others. We have some here who are in their 2nd decade of life, and we have others in their 9th decade, and everywhere in between. Hopefully, regardless of your age, you will benefit in at least some small way from my comments today, though not everything that I have to say will resonate with you, simply because of where you are in your life journey.
- 2nd disclaimer: this talk is not intended to describe HOW to make friends (although at the end we will hear some brief accounts from a handful of men who have been involved in activities here at FPC designed to bring men together so that friendships can develop); rather, it is partly *diagnostic*—here is the state of affairs, based on my reading on the subject and my own life experiences. The larger part is intended to be *provocative*, that is, to spur you on in your personal pursuit of friendships.
- 3rd disclaimer: If you already have several, or at least a few, good Christian male friends, then I am happy for you, and I do not intend to denigrate those existing friendships in any way. You may find something in my remarks that will encourage you in your friendships, but my focus is primarily on those who perceive a deficiency in their friendships—you either have too few close friends, or the quality of those friendships is lacking in some important way.
- 4th disclaimer: I am aware that the “male friendship initiative” is not new—it is not new to this church, nor to our denomination, nor to the larger evangelical church in America. I have spoken to others in this church who, after attending a Promise Keepers rally in the Kingdome, sought to promote closer friendships in the church. What happened? The effort more or less fizzled out as men let it be known, either directly or indirectly, that their lives were already “too busy” to accommodate time for male bonding (“bromance”). So we must acknowledge up front that there is a good deal of skepticism about this male bonding thing, and much of that skepticism derives from failed, or perhaps more accurately, *aborted* attempts in the past. I appeal to you to not allow your attitude to be too jaundiced by your past experiences, but instead to keep an open mind to God's will for your life in this regard.
- The final disclaimer is this: there are different *degrees* of friendship, ranging from very casual to intimate. For example, Geoffrey Greif in his book *Buddy System: Understanding Male Friendships* describes 4 types of friends:
 - the *just* friend (casual acquaintance only)

- the *rust* friend (perhaps someone you grew up with but with whom you are not particularly close; rust friends can drift in and out of each other's lives)
- the *trust* friend (a sounding board; usually liked and trusted but not as emotionally invested as a *must* friend)
- the *must* friend (a true confidant with whom you can share anything). I am not equally interested, nor should you be, in each of these 4 types. We should focus more on the *trust* and *must* friends, so keep that in mind throughout the remainder of what I have to say on the subject of friendships.

You might think of friends on an **emotional spectrum**, with *casual* (no emotional commitment and limited personal involvement) on one end and *intimate* (high emotional commitment and personal involvement) on the other end.

So the **goal** is not to have as many friends as you can—like an Easter egg hunt in which you outdo the other kids. Rather, it is to **have at least one or more close friends, with whom you can be intimate**. Andrew Bonar, in his *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, speaks of this type of friendship in the life of the 19th c. Scottish minister: "All with whom he was *intimate* still remember with gratitude how faithfully and anxiously he used to warn his *friends* of whatever he apprehended they were in danger from." (p.130)

My message can be summed up this way: **"I exhort you—if you are living in isolation, with relatively few or no close friends, forsake your isolation and do whatever it takes to make close friends. You will not regret that you did. But let us not deceive ourselves: this is no easy task, neither to make, nor to keep, close friends."** (In a 1995 survey of Christian men, some 95% reported having no close friends; of those 95%, about 80% said that *at one time* they did have at least one close friend. This speaks to the challenge of keeping friends.)

Let's begin by hearing the wisdom of the ages declare that **Men need (male) Friends**

- ***Friendship is not essential to survival, but it is essential to happiness and longevity***
 - **Cicero**, Roman philosopher, celebrated male friendship as "the most valuable of all human possessions." Someone who has a true friend "sees the exact counterpart of his own soul."
 - Who better to speak for the early Christian Church on this subject than **St. Augustine** (in *City of God*): "What gives us consolation in this human society filled as it is with errors and troubles, if not the sincere loyalty and mutual love of true and good friends?"
 - And a voice from one of the founding fathers of our country, **John Adams** (in a letter to his cousin): "Friendship is one of the distinguishing glories of men...From this I expect to receive the chief happiness of my future life."
 - The 20th c. Christian apologist, **C.S. Lewis** (in letter to his best friend, Arthur Greeves): "Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art...It has no survival value; rather, it is one of those things that give value to survival."

- More from Lewis (in letter dated 29 Dec 1935): “ Tho’ our novels now ignore it, friendship is the greatest of worldly goods. Certainly to me it is the chief happiness of life. If I had to give a piece of advice to a young man about a place to live, I think I should say, ‘sacrifice almost everything to live where you can be near your friends.’ I know I am very fortunate in that respect, and you much less so. But even for me, it would make a great difference if you (and one or two others) lived in Oxford.”
- *Modern medical and social research confirms that friendships result in increase in happiness and longevity*
 - Framingham data
- Entertainment portrays the power of friendships
 - Tom Hanks in *Castaway*; he instinctively created a friend named Wilson, who brought him happiness on the deserted island.
- So if sages of the past, and scholars and entertainers of the present, have touted the benefits of friendship, **how are we doing in the cultivation of friendships in these United States of America?**
 - Historically, it is important to note that the USA has always valued *individualism*, which by itself is more likely to result in isolation than in friendships. Listen to **Alexis de Tocqueville**, 19th c. French historian who visited the US and commented that “there never has been a country so committed to individual wants as opposed to collected needs.”
 - Despite the undercurrent of individualism in this country, our national history also has a rich tapestry of communalism, social connectivity, call it what you like. Harvard political scientist, Robert Putnam, documents in his excellent book *Bowling Alone* how the USA is presently in a down cycle in terms of “social capital”, by which he means all the different ways in which our lives are enriched by social ties. This downturn seems to have started in the 1960s. For our purposes today, it is irrelevant that fewer parents are involved in PTAs, or that fewer people are playing cards socially (etc, etc) but it is relevant how this trend in social capital has affected close friendships.
 - Daniel Levinson in his book *The Seasons of a Man’s Life* (pub. 1978) describes the findings of a team of social scientists from Yale who studied a cross section of adult American men over many years. These social scientists reported “In our interviews, friendship was largely noticeable by its absence...most men do not have an intimate male friend...”
- If it is true that many men live disconnected lives (that is, in isolation from other men), can the same be said of *Christian* men? Surely we know better. We have the example of Jesus and his disciples, whom he referred to as his friends. But alas, I fear that rather than being salt and light to the world in this respect, much of the church today reflects the trends in the surrounding society.

- Today...despite the proliferation of iPhones, Blackberries, e-mail and social networking Web sites, many Christian men, if they are honest, will tell you that they are lonely. They may twitter several times a day to co-workers, they may have golf buddies; they may even grab coffee with colleagues from time to time. But so many men who attend church regularly are friendless.
- Secular psychologist can tell you why men struggle to build close relationships with each other. But we rarely address this issue in the church—and as a result many Christian men live in painful isolation.
- So much for the diagnostic, or descriptive, information. In short, many men today, including many Christian men, are relatively isolated, and as a result, do not enjoy the many benefits that derive from close friendships. Before considering the distinctly *spiritual* benefits, perhaps it would be helpful to consider some of the common **BARRIERS to male friendships**
 - *The competition trap*
 - We are raised to compete, to win, so every other male becomes an obstacle to our goal.
 - We see the competition trap at play among Jesus' disciples. Consider, for example, the exchange between Jesus and his disciples during the Last Supper (Luke 22:24-27)
 - Male pride drives competition, and it is the single greatest reason that we cannot get close to our brothers in Christ. It's the reason a guy with a porn addiction can't be honest enough to share his ugly secret. It's the reason that a pastor can't admit that his marriage is suffering. And on and on...
 - Macho stereotype: a real man is a rugged individualist, strongly independent, emotionally detached, covered in body armor without visible weaknesses.
 - Being the independent creatures that we are, the idea of "needing" other men in our lives does not sit well with us. This opens us to being *vulnerable*, which is an uncomfortable zone for most men.
 - Jesus shattered this stereotype
 - Ponder this, brothers: Jesus could have accomplished his earthly errands all by himself; in the absolute sense, he did not "need" anyone else to procure our salvation; but in the infinite wisdom of his deity, and in the fullness of his humanity, he chose to have close relationships with other men, specifically the inner circle of three, and the larger group of twelve.
 - Recall, too, that Jesus eternally enjoys the communion of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
 - Fear of intimacy (non-sexual) with other men

carrying all their studies in the same spirit, watched each other's steps in the narrow way."

- M'Cheyne's description of how he and his fellow minister friend watched out for each other is akin to *military buddies*, who are trained to watch out for their comrades in arms.
- We all know that there are the wrong kind of friends and the right kind. Again from M'Cheyne: "God has in this past year introduced me to the preparation of the ministry—I bless him for that. He has taken conclusively away friends that might have been a snare—must have been a stumbling block—I praise him for that. He has introduced me to one Christian friend, and sealed more and more my amity with another—I bless him for that."
- ***We can go further and faster in our spiritual journey with the help of others***
 - Why do geese fly in "V" formation
 - By flying in "V" formation, geese add approx 71 % to their flying range than if they were to fly alone. AS each bird flaps its wings, it created an updraft for the bird immediately following. Left to itself, the lone goose experiences a drag and resistance that causes it to long for the flock. When the lead bird in the formation tires, it simply rotates back in the formation and another bird flies the point. (Yagel, *Forging Bonds of Brotherhood*, pp.56-57)
- ***We are engaged in spiritual warfare against the flesh, sin, and the Devil; we cannot defeat the enemy single-handedly***
 - The lesson of the battle of Amalek (Exodus 17:9-13)
 - So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

- Spiritual lesson: the battle would have been lost were it not for the help of Moses' friends.
- A lesson from ancient mythology: the Sirens
 - In Greek mythology the Sirens were the seductresses of seafaring men. Ancient sources, namely Homer's *Odyssey* and Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, describe their "siren song"—a beautiful music that compulsively lured sailors toward the island of the Sirens, only to have their ships dashed on the rocks. The ancient sources tell us of two ships that survived...
 - The ship carrying Odysseus, who was warned by the goddess Circe:
 - "The Sirens sit in a green field and warble him to death with the sweetness of their song. There is a great heap of dead man's bones lying all around, with the flesh still rotting off them."
 - At the insistence of Circe, Odysseus plugs the ears of his fellow sailors with wax. Because he wants the pleasure of hearing the Sirens (without the deadly consequences), he commands his men to bind him half-way up the mast of the ship, standing upright. He tells them further, "If I beg and pray you to set me free, then bind me more tightly still."
 - Spiritual lesson: sometimes we need friends to bind us to the mast, so to speak, in order to avoid the lure of temptation and calamity of sin.
 - Another ship called the Argonaut, whose captain, Jason, was warned about the Sirens by the centaur Chiron.
 - As Jason and the Argonaut approached the Sirens, they sent forth from their lips "a lily-like voice." The sailors are overcome with desire and are ready to cast their ropes from the boat to shore. Suddenly the musician on board names Orpheus pulls out his stringed lyre and "rung forth the hasty snatch of a rippling melody so that their ears might be filled with the sound of his twanging; and the lyre overcame the maidens' voice.
 - Spiritual lesson: misplaced affections need to be replaced by the far greater power of the

affection of the Gospel. God can use Christian friends in your life to help this process along.

- The lesson from life's experience: in isolation, sin can more easily gain a stronghold
 - Secret sin, as long as it remains secret, retains its power over us
 - Secret sin, once confessed to another Christian brother, loses its grip and eventually its power.
 - Caveat: such sharing is not done lightly or indiscriminately; there must first be a relationship that is built on trust and caring—"I trust that what I tell you here, stays here."
- It is the pattern of discipleship that we see established by Christ during his earthly ministry
 - Once chosen by Jesus, his disciples are always seen together, in groups of 2 or more. Can you think of any exceptions? (Judas, when he betrayed Jesus, went alone to the religious leaders)
- We sometimes unfairly look to our spouses to make up for deficiencies in our life, including lack of male friendships
 - In other words, we expect things from our wives that they cannot deliver on (no fault of their own)
 - Nothing I have said today should be construed as denigrating the unique role that spouses play in the lives of married men.
 - Ken Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*: "Men, if you are married, your wife must be your most intimate friend, but to say 'my wife is my best friend' can be (but need not necessarily be) a cop out. You also need Christian male friends who have a same-sex understanding of the serpentine passages of your heart, who will not only offer counsel and pray for you, but will also hold you accountable to your commitments and responsibilities when necessary."
 - Testimony of Nate Larkin: "During most of the last 28 years I had only one real friend—my wife, Allie. As far as I knew, she was the only person who knew my crap and loved me anyway. Being the only friend was hard on Allie. Sure, she wanted me all to herself. She liked the feelings of togetherness we experienced when my head was actually at home. But she got tired of being the only one who could confront me when I was wrong, advise me when I was confused, and cheer me up when I was depressed. I piled the weight of all my missing friendships onto her and then got mad when she acted like a girl." (Intro to *Samson and the Pirate Monks: Calling Men to Authentic Brotherhood*)
- It is a miserable state not to have Christian friends

- Would anyone then want to be my friend?
- If you feel that male friendships *are* important to your general happiness and spiritual well-being, and if you *are not* satisfied with the present state of your friendships, then what do you intend to do about it?

Let me tell you the abridged story of a formerly friendless man named Nate, who was forced to deal with the besetting sin in his life, and the isolation that allowed that sin to continue. He is married and the father of 3 children and attends a PCA church near Nashville TN. He was a PK (preacher's kid), raised in a fundamentalist home. He decided to follow in his father's ministerial footsteps, so he went to seminary. While in seminary, one of his class assignments was to visit NYC and witness the exploitation of woman by viewing a peep show (his wife accompanied him!). Rather than having the intended effect of sensitizing him to exploitation of women, it served only to heighten his interest in pornography, which continued after seminary, in a 5 yr. pastorate, and beyond, as he pursued various secular occupations. He carelessly viewed porn at work, and a coworker caught on to what he was doing and told him "Call this number, you need help." He reluctantly started to attend a sexual addiction 12 step group. Later, he and a small group of Christian men held the first meeting of what became known as the Samson Society, which they envisioned as a Christian mutual aid society. (Although some of the principles behind Samson Society were derived from 12 step program, SS strictly speaking is not a 12 step group.)

This group was not intended solely for men whose besetting sin is sexual in nature, but for any man who sought closer fellowship with God through "authentic brotherhood". From that small group in Tennessee has grown a coalition of like-minded groups around the country.

Tony's testimonial (Samson and the Pirate Monks, pp 142-143)

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