

We Need Each Other

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[0 : 00] In the absence of shared social spaces like offices or coffee shops or gyms or churches, many of our casual acquaintances have dropped off altogether.

Many of those casual interactions with people, we may know their name, we see them because they know our order at the coffee shop, those relationships faded away. I think some people, if we're honest, have celebrated the complete lack of social obligations.

I would put myself in that category. I'm an introvert. And so as much as I'm a very social person, I love when we have nothing on the calendar. It feels very freeing and I think some people are feeling anxiety about the calendar starting to fill back up.

I think other people, though, have struggled with tremendous loneliness. And even close friends, even close family members have been driven apart by the amount of cultural and political division and tension that exists in our society.

I've experienced that in my own family. I have family members who don't speak to each other because of political differences. And so now, as we are sort of looking forward, imagining that at some point we might be somewhat post-pandemic, a lot of people are asking, you know, when we eventually come out of all of this, what should my social priorities be?

[1 : 34] It feels like for some people, this is a bit of an opportunity to reset your social life. Do I want to go back to the way things were before? Or do I want to make changes, capitalizing on what has happened over the last year?

There was actually an article, an essay in the New York Times written by Kate Murphy back in June where Murphy offers tips for how to optimize your friendscape.

I've never heard that term before, a friendscape. But apparently if you can have a landscape and a tablescape, you can also have a friendscape. And so she says, here's how you can optimize your friendscape post-pandemic, optimize meaning you get the most fulfillment out of the relationships that you're investing in.

So, you know, this raises a question for us as Christians, how should we be thinking about our friendscape? How should we be thinking about our social priorities? And is there any difference in how Christians think about this?

And so this morning we're going to see what the Apostle Paul might have to say about these questions. We're going to be looking at Acts chapter 20, verse 36, through chapter 21, verse 26.

[2 : 40] We read a section of that, Jeff did earlier, but we're going to be looking at that whole section. And we're going to be looking at Paul's journey from Miletus to Jerusalem. And this kind of looks like a travel log.

It looks like there's not much happening here, but in fact, we get a glimpse into a day in the life of Paul, and specifically the kinds of relationships that Paul prioritized.

He was always evangelizing, always among non-Christians. But we see two kinds of Christian relationships that Paul prioritized. He prioritized Christian fellowship, and he prioritized Christian friendship.

And we're going to look at those two kinds of relationships and ask what this means for us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that we're here at your invitation.

We thank you for the prayer we prayed a little while ago, that your grace always precedes us. It's because of your grace that we're here. It's because of your grace that you speak to us through your word.

[3 : 40] It's because of your grace that you know what we each need to hear right now. And so, Lord, I pray that your spirit would do your work through your word in us, that we might be people who glorify you, Lord, in our relationships.

We pray this in your son's name. Amen. Amen. So, first of all, we see in Paul's life this priority put on Christian fellowship. The thing you need to understand about Paul is that from the moment of Paul's conversion, he is on the road.

He is traveling. And some estimates say that Paul traveled as many as 10,000 miles on his various missionary journeys. And a lot of that was on foot.

So, Paul traveled thousands of miles, and whenever Paul arrived in a new place, not only was he there to evangelize, but one of the first things he would almost always do would be to find the local church.

He would arrive and he would say, where are the Christians? Where's the church? Where are the disciples? And he would seek them out. And we see that here again and again and again. Back in chapter 18, Jeff preached on that a few weeks ago.

[4 : 53] So, Paul arrives in Corinth. The first thing he does is to seek out Priscilla and Aquila. In chapter 21, he has a seven-day layover in Tyre. And verse 4 says, the first thing he does is to seek out the disciples in Tyre.

That means the church. Now, what you have to understand is, you say, well, of course. I mean, Paul was planting churches. He wanted to check and see how they were doing. Paul never planted this church. He didn't plant the church in Tyre.

He didn't know these people. He had never met them. And yet he prioritizes finding them. Not just to say hello, but to worship with them and spend time with them. They form such a bond over the course of a week that when it's time for Paul to leave, everybody from the church, just imagine this.

He's been there a week. Everybody from the church, men, women, children, they all come with Paul out to the beach. They all kneel together in the sand and they all pray for his departure.

I mean, that's a beautiful send-off. Then they arrive in Ptolemy and they find the church there and they spend the night with those believers.

[5 : 59] And then they go to Caesarea and they stay with Philip the evangelist and his daughters who have the gift of prophecy. And they stay there for a number of days. And then the people from the church in Caesarea personally escort Paul and his party to Jerusalem.

So all along the way, wherever Paul goes, he finds the church. It was funny. I was talking to the Beelmans who were back with us. Dan and his family are back.

We're very excited about this. Yes? So if you see a sketchy guy walking around who looks like Dan Beelman but not in a collar, it's because they're back.

He's officially back starting next week. But we're happy to have him. But he was telling me a little bit about their travels over the course of their sabbaticals. I'm sure they'll tell you. And one of the things they did was wherever they went, they tried to find the local church.

And so they have all these great stories of worshiping in and meeting people in all of these Anglican churches all around the Anglican communion. And this is what Paul did. And what you see in Paul's life is because he is open and desirous of fellowship, because Paul's the kind of guy who would come into a place like Tyre and say, I've never met those people.

[7 : 11] I have no idea what they're like, but I know they're followers of Jesus, and I want to worship with them. Because he's that kind of person, he had to be able to get along with all different kinds of Christians.

And there were and are lots of different kinds of Christians who fall along different cultural lines. And you see a prime example of this in chapter 21, verse 17.

Paul arrives in Jerusalem, and the church in Jerusalem is filled with thousands of converts from Judaism to Christianity. And because they converted from Judaism to Christianity, they are zealous for the traditions of their fathers.

They had grown up with the ceremonial purification rites. They had grown up with the Mosaic law. It wasn't just a way of pleasing God. It was an entire way of life.

It was the only culture they knew. Paul gets into Jerusalem, tells them about his travels among the Gentiles, and you can imagine what they say to one another. Like, great Paul, that sounds amazing.

[8 : 12] Lots of Gentile conversions. But then behind closed doors, they're like, but that means he's unclean. Because he's been among the Gentiles. And so the elders pull Paul aside and they say, listen, we know your message.

We know what you've been preaching. We know that what you're saying about the Mosaic law is that it is no longer a way to be saved. That it never was. And that the only way to be saved, the only way to truly be cleansed, is through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ.

We know this. We believe this. What you have to understand is that there's a lot of misconception in this church about you. A lot of people see you as an enemy of Jewish culture.

They think that you're trying to subvert our entire way of life. And a lot of these people don't trust you. And so what they say is, what would be really great, Paul, is if you were to go through the purification rites, the seven-day cleansing period, because you've been among the Gentiles, and if you were to pay off the debt owed by these four, pay the offering for these four men who are under a vow, come to their absolution ceremony, show people that you're not totally against our way of life, and they're probably going to be much more willing to trust you.

Now, Paul knows that this purification rite means nothing. He knows that Jesus is the only one who can purify you, and yet he does it. He does it anyway.

[9 : 40] It probably really goes against a lot of Paul's convictions, but he's willing to do it. And you ask, well, why? Is this a moment of hypocrisy in Paul's life? And you say, no.

One of the commentators, the G. Fernando, says, I believe this shows us how seriously Paul viewed the unity of the church and how he was willing to do everything possible to be one with those who were different in perspective from himself.

Listen to this point. Paul was so committed to Christian fellowship that he's willing to flex to accommodate all of these Jewish converts.

Now, I want to be clear on this. There are some things that Paul would never flex on. Issues that were core to the gospel, core to Jesus, core to salvation. Paul will contend for those things until he dies.

But what we're dealing with here is a cultural difference. This would be like coming into a church of living and worshiping as a Christian so that I can get along with the people in this room.

[10 : 43] That's what Paul is doing. And so this is a kind of cultural difference. This would also apply to political differences. Paul would prioritize unity over being right.

And that's a very important thing to see. So the summary of this first point is this. I guarantee you Paul was as busy as anybody in this room. And Paul probably traveled more than most of us in this room.

And yet Paul did whatever he could to stay connected to other believers because he prioritized Christian fellowship. So before we move on, I just want to ask, what does this mean for a church like ours in the age of COVID when a lot of churches like ours decided back in March of 2020 to take our service and a lot of our programming online?

I stand by that decision. I believe that it was the right thing to do. It was the way to love our neighbors and to slow the spread of COVID. And that's why we did it. And I think on the one hand, if I recognize there are people right now who are live streaming this service, we have to recognize and praise God for the benefits and the blessings that have come with this technology.

This has allowed people to connect with us. Not only people who can't come to worship with us, but people from all around the world. This has allowed people to connect with us who were not a part of any church.

[12 : 06] This has allowed people to connect with us who never otherwise would have found our church. And some of those people are sitting in the room right now. They're here because they found us online. And praise God for that.

This continues to allow people to join with us virtually because there are legitimate reasons why people can't or should not come right now, especially with concerns over the Delta variant, people feeling that for all kinds of various legitimate reasons, they're not ready to expose themselves or their children to the possibility of infection.

So it's a blessing that those people can continue to worship with us. But on the other hand, how is this altering our view of church moving forward long-term?

What's the long-term impact of this? My sense is that for many of us, the fact that we've gone so long without worshipping in person means that the whole idea of having to get up, get yourself ready, maybe get your kids ready, maybe get your spouse ready so that you can come to church together in person, that that is moving way down on the priority list of a lot of people.

We went so long without it, why do we need it? And you think about all of the things vying for that place of priority on a Sunday morning. You know, working remotely means that you can travel and stay gone on vacation a lot longer and work from anywhere, so no need to be in D.C.

[13 : 40] Life is extremely busy. Things are picking back up. It's only going to get busier. Then you have kids' sports. A lot of our sports commitments happen on Sunday mornings.

Then you have the allure of things like Sunday brunch that we would love to be able to do or just the pure joy of sleeping in. Now, I'm not here to accuse anyone.

I love a good Sunday brunch. I want you to consider, though, and be honest with yourself, what are my priorities? What takes that place of primacy?

So that's the first thing we need to be thinking. The second question is, is it, you know, how does this impact the way we think about being Christians in an age of political and cultural division?

When you look at Paul, how he lived, how might we live? Right? Advent is blessed to be a culturally and politically diverse church. If you're newer, you may not know that.

[14 : 40] But there are so many different political, cultural, religious backgrounds represented in this room right now. It's amazing. It's one of the great charisms, the great blessings that we have. We have Biden supporters.

We have Trump supporters. And we have everything in between. We have people who disagree on almost every major issue you can think of. And that's a huge blessing.

This month, we're launching two new initiatives at Church of the Advent. One is a ministry to refugees. And that ministry means that we're going to primarily be partnering with an organization that's at work, doing work here in D.C.

that probably falls to the left of where most people are at Church of the Advent. The other initiative that we're launching is an outdoor ministry for men and boys called Trail Life. And that organization is culturally and politically on the right, probably further to the right than most people in this room.

And we're doing both. And I can guarantee you, because it's already started to happen, it's going to upset some people on both sides. And they're going to say, why is our church partnering with them?

[15 : 46] Or partnering with them? What does that say about our church and where we're headed? What I would say is that it provokes us to ask this question. Is it worth it for us to come together and to overcome our differences in order to have fellowship?

Or is it better to simply stay home and spend time with people who only think like we do? And that's what you can do when you can live stream church from anywhere. In that article I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, on Friendscapes from Kate Murphy, she actually warns readers, and this is a quote from her article, that she says, we need to be mindful of spending too much time with friends who struggle with weight, depression, or substance abuse.

Be mindful of how much time you spend with people who struggle with those things. Because she says that we should prioritize people who make us feel better about the world and about ourselves.

And if you're spending time with somebody who's struggling, you're not going to feel very good. That's not the best way to optimize your friendscape. But it reflects this kind of modern conception of relationships that we have in our culture.

My question when I look at this person, Jeff, does he meet my needs? Is Jeff fulfilling to me? Yes, you are.

[17 : 05] Is he fulfilling to me? Does he fit in with my life plan? Is he going to help optimize my social friendscape? You know, or not?

Is he going to drag me down? The thing that we need to understand by looking at Paul and other places in Scripture is, Christians don't ask, what can you do for me? Christians ask, what might God do in us both?

Just by us being in connection with one another. You know, we believe that when we gather like this, that God is active and present in a unique way when his people come together, wherever two or three are gathered.

And there are all kinds of ways that the Holy Spirit works in us when we come together in person. You know, maybe you are angry at somebody in this room right now, and you are bitter toward them, and you can't stand the sight of them, and then guess what happens?

Perhaps you're coming up in line to receive communion, and that person is standing right in front of you. And you're standing there looking at the back of their head, and you're thinking, how in the world could this happen?

[18 : 12] The Holy Spirit wants to convict you and soften your heart. Do not think that that is a random occurrence. Maybe you're feeling overwhelmed by all that's happening in the world.

You look at Afghanistan, you look at just kind of the mess everywhere, and you feel completely overwhelmed. And then we stand together, and all of a sudden we're singing a song about the victory of Jesus, and how one day Jesus is going to come back and bring justice and mercy and put the world right again, and everything is going to be restored.

And as you're struggling to sing it, you hear the voices of your brothers and sisters all around you, and they're singing it with conviction, and all of a sudden, guess what's happening? The Holy Spirit is using their faith to strengthen your faith.

Right? Maybe you act like everything is great in your life, and you have this projection of positivity, but it's starting to crumble. And then you have a random conversation with somebody, you haven't talked to them in six months, out on the patio out there, and they kind of pull you aside, and they look at you, and they say, how are you really doing?

And you weren't planning on talking about it. Not even with your therapist. Not even with your spiritual director. And all of a sudden, it just starts coming out. The Holy Spirit is using that person to bring things into the light.

[19 : 29] Places that you need healing. Maybe you find yourself in conversation with somebody you completely disagree with politically. I can't believe you voted for that person. I hate people like you.

Right? And then you end up really connecting. And some of the things they say make sense. And the Spirit starts to kind of nudge you and convict you of your pride and your closed-mindedness and your tendency to judge people who are different from you.

Right? So we like to think that God works in these kind of mountaintop experiences and God works when we go here or do that. God is working right now. God works through those chance, random, small talk encounters.

That is the Christian life. And so Christian fellowship means making yourself available to God and what God might do through other people in your life. Christian fellowship is essential to what it means to be a Christian.

And here's the thing. You can stream sermons. You can stream music. But you cannot stream Christian fellowship. And there is nothing that God can do in your heart hiking the Camino de Santiago or spending a year at Labrie that he cannot do on an average Sunday morning in a local church.

[20 : 47] So I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you're here. So that's the first point. Paul prioritizes Christian fellowship. The second point is shorter, but every bit is important.

In addition to Christian fellowship, which is a sort of general openness and desire to be around and can connect with lots of different Christians, we also see that Paul prioritizes Christian friendship.

And if fellowship is open and inclusive, friendship is far more exclusive by design. I mean, every now and then you meet somebody in your life who starts to become a true friend.

And so friendship is more exclusive. You may only have a handful of really close Christian friends. And what the Bible would show us is that we need both. You need fellowship and you need friendship.

Right? You need traveling companions. In addition to all of the churches that Paul visited, Paul's close friends and companions were always with him. He almost always had traveling companions with him on the road.

[21 : 49] And throughout Acts 21, Paul has something like eight other men who are traveling with him on his journey to Jerusalem. And we know that one of those people is the apostle Luke.

And you say, well, how do we know that Luke is with Paul on this journey? And that's because at some point, when they reach Troas, from that point on, all of a sudden it becomes, we, we did this, we did that.

And what most likely happened is Luke was in Troas. And as Paul passes through, Luke joins him and continues on with him. So in that point in the story, it becomes first person plural, we.

And so these men are traveling with Paul. And so we ask, well, what are the qualities that you look for in a true Christian friend? And here we see two. The first quality that you look for in a true Christian friend is this, that they're the kind of person who seeks God's greatest good in your life.

They seek God's greatest good in your life. We know from Acts chapter 20, verse 22, that Paul felt constrained by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem.

[22 : 54] That's where God was calling him to go. But all along the way, the Holy Spirit has been telling Paul's friends that when he gets to Jerusalem, bad things are going to happen. You're going to be tied up. You're going to be handed over.

You're going to be imprisoned. You may even die. He's hearing all of these horrible things. The Spirit is telling all of his friends this is going to happen. And so everybody is begging Paul not to go. Please don't go to Jerusalem.

They're weeping. They're imploring him. And Luke confesses, even, you know, I was begging him. None of us wanted Paul to go because we knew bad things were going to happen. Paul says in verse 13, what are you doing?

Weeping and breaking my heart. For I'm ready not only to be in prison, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And the way his friends respond is really what defines them as being true Christian friends.

Verse 14, since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, let the will of the Lord be done. And what commentators say is, do not make the mistake of thinking that this is just a tired resignation.

[23 : 57] They give up. Okay, whatever, Paul. This is an earnest prayer. They're saying what we really want for you. Emotionally, what we want is that you would live forever.

But even more than that, what we really want for you is that the will of the Lord would be done in your life, even if it means that you're going to suffer. Even it means that we might suffer. Right?

And so they say this amazing thing to Paul, and it shows us that even though they love Paul, they actually love and trust God more. They love Paul enough to do everything to protect him, but they love God enough to do nothing to stop him from going when they know that it's God's will that he go.

And you know, in this day and age, you're often going to hear people say, well, you know, I just, all that, what I really, I just want you to be happy. I mean, yeah, if that's going to make you happy, that's what I really want.

I just want you to be happy. That's what a friend is, right? A friend is just, I just, whatever it means for you, I just want you to be happy. True Christian friends don't say that. True Christian friends say, you know, I'm not going to settle for what you think is going to make you happy.

[25 : 06] I'm not even going to settle for what I think might make you happy. I'm not going to settle for anything short of God's greatest good in your life, whatever that might be.

And I'm going to fight for that, even if it brings us intention with one another. And we need people like this in our lives, you know, whatever your version of Jerusalem looks like, whatever your Jerusalem is, everybody in this room, God has a purpose for you and God is calling you to a vocation and God is intending to work through you in that vocation.

Whatever that is, it probably means you're going to suffer and it probably means there are going to be things that you have to do that you don't want to do, things that may even harm you. And you need people in your life who want God's will to be done in your life, even if it means it's going to be hard.

Even if it means you're going to suffer. So that's the first quality of a true Christian friend. The second quality is that true friends stay by your side, even when it's hard.

You know, these men realize that Paul must go to Jerusalem even though it's dangerous, even though there's risk, because God is calling him there. So look what they say. And I've read over this a hundred times before I saw it and what it actually means.

[26 : 24] In verse 15, after these days, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. You're like, wait, what? The word that I skipped over a hundred times, we. The Spirit says, you're going to suffer, you're going to die, it's going to be bad for you in Jerusalem.

Not you're going to die, but they're afraid he's going to die. It's going to go bad for you. They try to convince him not to go. They're weeping. Paul says, I have to go. God's calling me to go. They say, okay, well, we're going with you.

You're not going alone. Even if it means we're going to suffer. And then here's the thing. If you follow the story out, you know what happens. Almost all those guys pull out at some point or another.

Except one. One person stays by his side. If you look at the last letter Paul ever wrote, 2 Timothy, Paul sitting in prison, just as the Spirit predicted what happened.

And Paul writes, Luke alone is with me. Luke alone is with me. Luke is Paul's faithful companion.

[27 : 36] Luke who Paul calls the beloved physician. Now why would Paul call him the beloved physician? All the times that Paul was whipped, beaten, stripped, thrown down on the ground, left to rot in prison, left for dead.

Who do you think it was that picked him up? Who do you think it was that bandaged his wounds? Who do you think it was that fed him and nursed him back to health? Who do you think it was that got him new clothing, new supplies?

Who do you think it was that encouraged him to get back up on his feet and to keep going the hard road? It was the beloved physician. His friend Luke. And you may hear this and you think, well this is crazy.

This sounds like sadism. You know, you're saying that these people were being good friends to Paul by seeking God's greatest good and yet that means that he's going to have to go and suffer in Jerusalem?

And I would say, yeah, it does sound crazy by today's standards, but it doesn't sound any crazier than the idea that God's greatest good for all humanity would be sending another man to go and suffer in Jerusalem.

[28 : 45] But this man, unlike Paul, didn't have anybody go with him. Everybody pulled out. Everybody abandoned him. And it wasn't just any man, it was God's own son.

And this is the point we want to end on. As important as it is to have fellowship and to have friendship, and we all need both, our greatest hope is not our uncompromising commitment and devotion.

Our greatest hope is not our total devotion to one another. Our greatest hope is not our total devotion to unity. It's not our total devotion even to Jesus because over the course of our lives, we are going to fail and falter in all of those categories.

There's no such thing as a perfect friend. There's no such thing as perfect fellowship. Our hope doesn't rest in our devotion. It rests in Jesus' uncompromising devotion to us.

The fact that when Jesus looked at his disciples, saying of anyone who follows him, don't just think of yourself as a disciple, don't just think of yourself as a follower, I'm calling you a friend.

[29 : 56] And what that means is that Jesus will never, ever, ever abandon you. And the way we know that is by looking at the cross. The reason that we know that Jesus is such a good friend is he was willing to go to the cross not just with us but for us.

And because he was uncompromising on the cross, we know that he will be uncompromising in his commitment to us. It shows us that Jesus is the kind of friend who goes with us even to the grave, even into death, and he carries us through death to the other side, to what is waiting for us beyond death, never leaving us, never forsaking us.

And this is what our fellowship and our friendship has to be centered on. Not the fact that we are good friends, not the fact that we have an amazing, diverse fellowship, but on the fact that Jesus Christ is the one and only true friend who shows us what it means to be a friend.

And we need to be the kind of community that reminds one another of this again and again and again, especially when our lives become difficult. So I encourage you over the next months, over the next years, as you are thinking, how am I going to prioritize, how am I going to sculpt and shape my friendscape, prioritize both Christian fellowship and Christian friendship.

If you want to feel closer to God, focus on your relationship with God's people. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your son and we thank you for his commitment to us and we thank you that it's in your love that we learn how to love and it's in your friendship that we learn how to be friends and it's in your open embrace, Lord, on the cross.

[31 : 54] You open wide your arms on the hard wood of the cross and it's in that openness that we learn how to have fellowship. Lord, we pray for your blessing on this community that we would be those who first and foremost rest in your grace and commitment to us but that we would be people who are truly open and welcoming in our fellowship with one another and that we would be people who know how to be true friends, Lord, in ways that honor you.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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