

You've Got a Friend

As you look at the mission statement and core beliefs of our disability ministry, there's one on the list you might be a little surprised to see – Friendship. It's not a theological value or belief we talk about a lot, maybe because we pretty much take it for granted. But it turns out that friendship is actually something a lot of folks with developmental differences or mental illness lack. It's also something that Jesus offered them, and something that the church might be uniquely able to offer.

When did you start learning how to be a friend? In the first part of our lives, our social circle is small. It includes our mother and our father, siblings if there are any, maybe a grandparent or two. But it's not long before we begin to branch out and learn how to be friends with kids our own age. If you watch two toddlers sitting next to each other, it's clear that they're aware the other one is there. They may not play directly, but they make space for what the other child is doing. They begin to interact, to reach out to touch and explore, to share – or not to share – toys with one another. Most of us start learning to make friends early . know I remember Philip and Warren and Carolyn Nicely and Tori Bowen, all friends I made before I was five years old, some of them as early as two. We start early and we practice all our lives.

At their best, friends are people we enjoy being with, people we feel safe with, people who know us as we are and love us anyway, people we can disagree with and then settle things and move on. They help us to understand who we are by holding a mirror up to us so we can see ourselves as others see us. Friends are an essential part of our lives.

Now imagine what it would be like to go through life without any friends. Not much fun, right? Yet that is the case for many people with intellectual disabilities or mental illness. Sociologists have found that the number one issue for teens with intellectual disabilities is that they don't have any friends. The negative effects of this are significant. They have a poor self-image. They are isolated. They do less well in school. They have more behavior issues. There are reasons for the lack of friends, of course. For some people because of the way their brains work social skills have to be intentionally taught and learned. Those skills don't come automatically, and so they have never learned the skills of

socializing. Some have behavioral quirks that make them look strange so others are uncomfortable around them. Some folks have poor verbal skills that make them hard to talk to. But the fact remains, many folks with developmental disabilities or mental illness have no friends, only family and people who have a professional relationship to them. They become a diagnosis or a patient rather than a person. Life as a non-person is no fun. Your sense of self, which may already be not great, shrinks until it is almost gone. Your sense of hope that life could be better disappears. You disappear into your diagnosis.

But here's the good news. Those same sociological studies show that having only one friend can make a big difference. And here's the better news. That in a world of experts and specialized knowledge, there's one thing almost all of us already know how to do. We don't need to wait for any specialized training or develop a new skill set. We already know how to be a friend. We've been practicing all our lives. We can start making a difference in someone's life right now.

Let me tell you a story told by Benjamin T Conner his book "Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities". Greg was a volunteer in a ministry to adolescents with developmental disabilities. He had been hanging out with Wesley for two years. At first, he found Wesley hard to deal with. He was an overweight bully with bad body odor who rarely took responsibility for himself or others. If you met Wesley today, you'd find that hard to believe. Instead of grabbing all the food for himself and stuffing it in as fast as he could, at a recent meeting he brought gluten free snacks for Franklin because he knew Franklin had a restricted diet. He also started wearing deodorant. Wesley spoke about his experience to a group of youth volunteers. What made the difference in his attitude and his outlook was a conversation he had with Greg about not eating a whole bag of chips or ordering from the supersize menu. Wesley had heard that before, but hearing it from a friend he knew cared about him made him pay attention and work to change.

So simple, right? But Greg made Wesley feel seen and valued as a person and a friend. It was that friendship that opened the door to hope that things

could be different. It was that companionship that gave him the ability to make a change.

That's what Jesus did with the people he encountered. If you remember, Jesus was always getting in trouble with the "good people" because of who he hung out with – "tax collectors and sinners". What he was really doing was being a friend to the friendless. He talked to the Samaritan woman and even drank from her drinking vessel, something that would have shocked even his followers since it made Jesus ritually unclean. But when he did that, he showed that he saw her as a person not as a defilement. By making himself "unclean" he brought her into the community of God and made her whole.

Likewise, when he met the Geresene man possessed by a demon in the graveyard, Jesus took time to talk to him and listen to his story. When he does that, he brings a simple healing that has even more power than the casting out of demons. Jesus sees the man as a person first, not a problem to be fixed, and that makes all the difference. Practical theologian John Swinton describes these interactions as "catalytic" – the reaction they bring forth are much greater than the initial action. He says, "the task of the Christ-like friend is not to *do* anything for them, but to *be* someone for them - someone who understands and accepts them as persons; someone who is *with* them and *for* them in the way that God is also *with* them and *for* them; someone who reveals the nature of God and the transforming power of the Spirit of Christ in form that is tangible, accessible, and deeply powerful."

When you say it that way, it sounds like a big deal, but it's not as hard as you might think. When we make friends, we often seek to find what it is we have in common with the other person and those common connecting places form a basis for the friendship. When we think of those with differences of whatever kind, it sometimes is a little harder to find those common connecting places. But it turns out that the other major factor in forming a friendship is simply spending time together. Over time, you find connecting places, however small, and a bond is formed and friendship begins.

That is part of the genius of what happened at Our Community Cup Coffeehouse pre-COVID, where week after week people are greeted by name,

and someone knows what you like to eat, and you sit across a table and color together or sing along to your favorite songs. One dad says his daughter feels like a rock star when she walks in each week and people are glad to see her, something she doesn't experience in other places in her life. In a recent survey of those who have attended Our Community Cup, the people you meet there, the community you find there, was named as the number one attraction, outweighing food, music or other activities. I will say from church volunteer's point of view, it's why it's really important to come out of the kitchen and sit at a table with guests when kitchen duties are done. Those simple, regular weekly interactions are seen as friendship, and they have a much larger impact than you will ever know. I know. I've heard the testimonies from our guests- our friends – over and over again. Our Community Cup is a place where strangers – and those who are often perceived as strange by others – become friends. When Erin Rafferty was writing about Our Community Cup in her upcoming book, she put it in the section about worship precisely because of the kind of community that is modeled there. At its best, it is the community formed by Jesus Christ, where friends of all kinds sit at the table with one another.

I was a somewhat lonely teenager when Carole King's song "You've Got a Friend" came out. For me, that song has always been about the promise Jesus makes to us, that he will call us friends, that he'll be there for us when times are dark and the road is hard. "You've got a friend." Because Jesus is there for us in that way, then we are called offer that gift of friendship to others. How can we be friends, especially to those who may not find friends in other places? That's part of the question we ask as we move ahead into God's future for us and for our church.

We human beings aren't made to be on our own. Without relationships, not only are we miserable but we also fail to grow.