

A Day in the Life sermon series
Jesus Makes Some Friends – Mark 1:14-20
February 6, 2022
Kory Wilcoxson

A recent statistic I read says that Facebook, the online social network that was born in a college dorm, now has over one billion users worldwide. If it were a country, it would now be the second-largest nation in the world, after China. And that means, if you are a Facebook user, there are over a billion opportunities to make a new friend. If Jesus had a Facebook account, how many friends do you think he would have? And how many would be real friends?-

As we continue our sermon series on “A Day in the Life” of Jesus, we’re looking at the story in Mark where Jesus makes some friends when he calls Simon and Andrew and James and John to leave their nets and follow him. These four, along with eight others, will become Jesus’ inner circle, the people he relies on the most as he navigates his ministry. What does Jesus teach us about the importance of having friends?

It’s not something that happens as much these days. Researchers from the American Sociological Review recently concluded that American adults have fewer friends than a generation ago, and increasingly fewer confidantes. Twenty-five percent of those surveyed said they had zero close friends. For those few who do have confidantes, 80% turn to family, and are less likely to count on friends, even friends from church. The report said the chief causes for these trends are longer, working hours, less time for socializing, and the isolation created by a reliance on technology.

That last one is insidious in the ways it has changed our understanding of what it means to be a friend. I believe the definition of a friend stayed pretty static until 2005, when Facebook was created. Then, “friend” took on a whole new meaning. In fact, it took on a whole new function: it became a verb! You can now “friend” someone, or participate in the act of “friending.” You can also “unfriend” someone, or be “unfriended” by them. Remember when, to make a friend, you just shared your crayons? Being a friend suddenly became a lot more complex.

Sydney called me very excited the other day. She had a job interview and as it turned out, the interviewer knew me! I silently prayed this was a benefit and not a detriment as I asked his name. When she told me, I said, “Hmm. I’m not sure who that is.” She replied, “Well, he said you were friends on Facebook.” Turns out we are! But I don’t know that I’ve ever actually met this person. And yet, we are “friends.”

I think what Facebook has done is allowed us to confuse being friends with being friendly. Online, we develop affinities with others, we find common ground, we learn more about them (at least what they are willing to show us). We are friendly. But friendliness has a transient quality to it. You can be friendly with someone, but an edgy comment or controversial political post can quickly turn that friendliness sour. Online, we can begin and end friendships like throwing a light switch. But in real life, friendships endure through all of life’s circumstances. One writer said, “A friendship that ceases to be was never truly a friendship. To end a friendship, you need to unstitch it little by little.” Yet you can end a friendship with the click of a button.

Let me go back to the study I mentioned at the beginning that talked about the lack of confidantes. I once heard a man tell about a prominent friend of his who

committed suicide. The man said his friend's suicide note still haunts him to this day, because in it his friend said, "In my darkest hour, I didn't have anyone to call." The man said he and his friend had many dinners together, played tennis together, attended baseball games together. He thought they were friends. But maybe they were just friendly, because when it became a matter of life and death, the friend had no one to call.

Jesus shows us a very different model of friendship in this story. I know that in most stories, Jesus is put forth as the hero: working miracles, healing people, etc. And often his disciples are portrayed as DUH-ciples, constantly arguing with each other and missing Jesus' point. But in this story, I think the disciples are the heroes. Realize that, at this point in the story, those four men probably didn't have any idea who Jesus really was. We are only 14 verses into the gospel of Mark, so Jesus has barely had time to lace up his sandals. He hadn't worked any miracles or delivered any sermons. And these men had other responsibilities to think about. They had families, they had jobs. They had 100 different reasons not to drop everything and follow this wandering prophet. And yet they went when Jesus called.

Talk about trust! I'm not sure about you, but I don't know that I would have responded the way they did. I might have been curious about what Jesus had to say, but I would probably want to ease into the situation a bit more slowly. Maybe I could put my name on a signup sheet for potential disciples or attend a potluck presentation on the Kingdom of God. Maybe if I waited a bit longer Jesus would offer a less rigorous category of auxiliary friendship, you know, the same benefits with such a radical commitment. Hey Jesus, can I just hit a "Like" button on your profile? Can we just be friendly?

But Jesus is not looking for "friendly." He needs to recruit people to help him spread the word about God's kingdom here on earth. I'm thinking he needs a few marketing folks, maybe a motivational speaker, a few talented salespeople. He needs friends who have something to offer him. So, who does he recruit? A bunch of fishermen and tax collectors and other blue-collar workers. Really, Jesus? Have you seen these guys' resumes? Have you *smelled* your resumes?

For me, that's one of the lessons about friendship that Jesus teaches here. He doesn't choose friends who have something to contribute to his life. These friends aren't going to improve his social status in the world. They aren't religious leaders or politicians or rich folks. From the outside, these people have no value. In fact, the religious leaders will criticize Jesus for just this point. "He eats with tax collectors and sinners." And yet, those people were also his closest friends.

What makes them his friends? Pretty simple. When he said, "Follow me," they did. They didn't ask why or where they were going. They just went. It's like the four friends who take the paralytic man to see Jesus. When they get there and the house is full, instead of turning away, they climbed on the roof, made a hole, and lowered their friend down so Jesus could heal him. One psychologist defined a friendship as "two people who demonstrate an irrational commitment to each other." The key is an "irrational commitment," meaning we'll do stupid, crazy, sacrificial things for each other, like make a hole in a roof or leave everything behind to go on an adventure.

For me, one of those people is Kevin. I remember the moment when I knew we had a true friendship. It was in a Steak-n-Shake. Lots of good things happen in a Steak-n-Shake. It was the first time we'd hung out together. We had just seen a band in concert

and were grabbing a bite to eat. I don't remember the specifics of the conversation, but I do remember during the course of our four-hour conversation that I felt like God had brought into my life a true friend. We have been there for each other through all seasons of life. I performed his wedding and then walked with him when it fell apart. He stood by my side when I was diagnosed with MS and lifted me up when I was ready to give up. We've had a lot of adventures together, living out our irrational commitment to each other.

The challenge with building these kinds of relationships is it takes time, and that's something we feel like we have so little of. These friendships don't happen by accident. If you think you can squeeze a friendship into a few quick checks of your computer screen, you can't. You can't click the "Like" button on someone's status a few times and form a real friendship. You can't listen in a hurry. You can't empathize in a hurry. Maybe that's why we have so few friends. We're always in a hurry.

A 12th-century monk said, "The best companion of friendship is reverence," which means that a characteristic of a true friendship is that each person in it realizes how lucky they are simply to be the other person's friend. There is an indescribable joy in being with someone with whom you don't feel compelled to add value. True friends are accepted, not for the value of what they add, but for the value of who they are. After all, that's how we are accepted by our God.

I wonder who would be our friends – and who would no longer be our friends – if we defined our friendships that way? In the Old Testament, after Job's life disintegrates around him, his three friends come to pick him apart, telling him all the things he did wrong to bring on this disaster. I wonder, if our lives fall apart, who'll be there to pick us apart, and who'll be there to help us pick up the pieces? I wonder, if it came right down to it, if their life was on the line, someone would call us? This week, I want you to pick up the phone and call someone who needs to hear from you. Don't be in a hurry. Take the time to invest in another person. Be their friend.

Don't let Facebook fool you; friendship is qualitative, not quantitative. My prayer for us is that we seek to make the same kind of irrational commitment to each other that those four friends made to the paralytic and that the disciples made to Jesus and that God made to us when God sent his only son to earth so that we would know the true meaning of life. Friendship is not a commodity; it is a blessing. Jesus said "Follow me," and they went. May God give us the friends we need, and give us the courage to be the kind of friend our friends deserve.