

1. The Foundation of Friendship

We are living in an age of increasing loneliness.

In January 2018 the British Prime Minister appointed what some are calling the UK's first 'minister for loneliness'; the government minister for sport and civil society tasked with leading a group tackling a problem which has reached epidemic proportions, affecting more than nine million adults in the UK.¹ A study by the British Red Cross published in December 2016 found that some 18 percent of the population are often or always lonely, and surprised many with the finding that some of the highest reported rates of loneliness were among the youngest; almost a third of adults under twenty-five feeling often or always lonely.²

Not only are these findings terribly sad, they are dangerous. Academic studies have shown the risks that loneliness poses to health. Lonely individuals are more prone to depression, and at higher risk of suicide in older age. They also have greater risk of cognitive decline and one study showed a 64 percent increased risk of developing clinical dementia.³

1 'May appoints minister to tackle loneliness issues raised by Jo Cox', The Guardian, 16 January 2018.

2 Red Cross report, 'Trapped in a Bubble: an investigation into the triggers for loneliness in the UK', from www.redcross.org.uk, pp. 17-18.

3 <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/> Last accessed 13 December 2018.

We might perhaps expect these detrimental effects on mental health, but loneliness also has an alarming impact on physical health. It increases the risk of high blood pressure, coronary heart disease and stroke, and raises the risk of the onset of disability. The effect of loneliness and social isolation on mortality is as dangerous as obesity, as damaging to health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, and overall it increases the likelihood of a premature death by 26 percent.⁴

All this from a lack in something so basic to our human nature: friendship. Friendship is very undervalued in our world today.

God created us for friendship

How wonderful, then, that our God not only knows the need of His people, but delights to bestow friendship; He ‘settles the solitary in a home’ (Ps. 68:6).

The Bible values friendship deeply. Jesus Himself makes that clear:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another (John 15:12-17).

For the Bible, this aspect of love we call friendship is fundamental to our nature as human beings. Humans are not created to be solitary creatures. We are created for friendship, friendship with God and friendship with one another.

That is the picture we have of God and man, as God meant man to be before the Fall; it is also the goal of God’s redeeming grace. James reminds us that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him

⁴ Ibid.

as righteousness” – and he was called a friend of God’ (James 2:23). As we have seen above, Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room, ‘No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends’. We are His family, not by the accident of physical birth, but we are a family of His friends. As Psalm 68:5-6 puts it, God is ‘Father of the fatherless and protector of widows... God settles the solitary in a home.’ God’s primary answer to the greatest need of human beings, the need to belong, is this friendship of His own family.

We live in a world where people crave intimacy. That is natural: we are not solitary beings. But our world is totally confused: our culture has confused the need for intimacy with a need for sexual relationships. We think the real, deep, personal relationships of trust and belonging, which we desire and need, come only from sexual relationships. But the Bible says that is not so. It is not marriage that is the answer to loneliness; it is the friendship of real family.

Above all, it is the friendship that comes from true fellowship with God and the family of God. That kind of friendship must be the greatest love of all, because as Paul tells us, this love ‘never ends’. ‘When the perfect comes’, that is God’s glorious kingdom, the imperfect, the partial, ‘will pass away’ (1 Cor. 13:8-10). According to Jesus Himself, that includes sexual relationships. In the glory of the Resurrection there will be no marrying or giving in marriage (Matt. 22:30). But there will still be love. It is the glory of new creation that there we will have the complete intimacy we desire – intimacy, friendship, with God and with one another.

Confusing sex with intimacy

So, the great irony is that we live in a society where there are sexual relationships aplenty, and yet decreasingly little real intimacy. Sex can be empty of real and deep satisfying love. But the Bible says that we can have deep, real and intimate love without sex, and indeed this is the loving intimacy which can endure for eternity.

So we need to think about friendship as an important aspect of love, quite apart from romance or sexual or even family affection. Many relationships involve different aspects of love, and a life-long relationship of marriage will involve many of them. But we must be able to distinguish these different aspects of love.

One of the saddest features, I think, in our culture today is the poverty of real friendships. In the past – and this was true among ancient cultures especially – friendship was exalted as the highest form of love. But Darwinism's legacy of biological reductionism combined with our contemporary sentimentalism about animals leads us to view human beings as just creatures like the rest, and diminishes the sense of man's uniqueness: we are not made as a crown of God's creation; we are no different to dolphins or bats or trees. And at the same time, our culture is extremely individualistic and narcissistic: it is *my* needs as defined by *me* that must be met.

All these things have led to the exaltation of the physical, the urges and the desires that I consider to be natural for me. Hence 'my sexuality' is so exalted. The satisfaction of my perceived sexual and emotional needs has become the most important thing in human relationships. And when we confuse romantic love – sexual love – with friendships, we will assume that all close and intimate relationships must be sexual relationships, whether between the opposite sex or the same sex. If there are deep and meaningful relationships between people of the same sex, nowadays people assume they must be homosexual ones. Twenty years ago, certainly thirty years ago, if two women were to share a house together, nobody would have thought, 'they're probably lesbian'. Today it is the first thing that goes through many people's minds. At the same time, relationships which are not sexual are often devalued and denigrated, so a friendship is not real unless it becomes sexual.

But this has resulted in a poverty in human relationships. Not only are there so many dysfunctional and broken relationships, but there are few real friendships of deep and lasting and meaningful quality. There

is a great need in our culture, and also in the church, to rediscover real friendship. And as Christians, of all people, surely we should demonstrate what it means to be a society of friends. We must be real friends, and have real friendships, especially with one another.

So what is real friendship? What does it require?

REAL FRIENDSHIP IS BORN OF A SHARED LOVE

First, real friendship is born of a shared love: love for something outside ourselves and beyond each other. Friendship is born out of a meeting of minds more than a meeting of bodies. It must be *about* something, some shared interest, some passion, some commitment. C. S. Lewis is the most helpful writer I have found on friendship, and he puts it this way, ‘Lovers are always talking to one another about their love, friends hardly ever about their friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other, friends are side by side absorbed in some common interest.⁵ It’s something outside of ourselves that binds friends together. It is a shared love, a hobby, music or art or football, or even keeping a special breed of hens.⁶

This interest is not always easy to define. But for real friendship to be possible it must be based on a plane of appreciation of things for their own sake, not the mere gratification of our senses or our certain personal sense of need. It is only through this, not just sharing out of need, which is the basis of real friendship.

That is why, as C. S. Lewis points out, very often people who just desperately want friends, nothing else, cannot seem to make any.⁷ The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends. Real friendship is born out of a shared love for something beyond ourselves, beyond our needs, a shared selfless passion for something else, of someone else. ‘Friendship’, says Lewis,

5 Lewis, C. S., *The Four Loves*, (Collins, 2012), p. 73.

6 One of my good friends has an astonishing array of friendships centred around his devotion to the Wellsummer breed of fowl!

7 Lewis, p. 80.