



# Pop the Corks & Pass the Butter Tarts

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction to a Series of Reflections on 40 Years of Spiritual Friendship

February 7, 2024

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Pop the corks and pass the butter tarts; June 2024 will mark Touchstone's 40th birthday.

1984. That year, Apple launched the McIntosh, its first consumer computer; the brand-new video game Tetris was released; then Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced his resignation; and a group of friends empowered me to start what would become Touchstone.



Over the past four decades, Touchstone grew into a ministry that offers, encourages, and teaches friendship in Christ among leaders in the business, political, arts, and spiritual marketplaces. That original group of friends and their successors have guided, managed, encouraged, and protected me throughout it all—culminating in years of fruitful ministry and spiritual exploration. It was their prodding that provoked this project.

But more about that later.

The entity that has become Touchstone emerged out of my curiosity about Jesus, and about friendship, leadership, and vocation. It also came on the heels of my abrupt departure, in December 1983, from the role of vice-president of Youth for Christ Canada.

During my nine years with Youth for Christ, it became obvious to me that people who worked in leadership roles were often lonely.

When travelling with that ministry, I would meet with staff, volunteers, board members, and donors. Of course, we talked about organizational and ministry issues. But the questions that really created open conversation were: “How’s it going with your life? What’s happening with your family? What are you afraid of?” I began to see that the loneliness of leaders was a place where God had given me the desire and ability to connect.

Having experienced loneliness in my own leadership roles over the years, I had gathered some peers to meet for prayer and mutual support. I was the only ministry guy in that group, but those friendships helped to sustain me in ways that neither my church nor workplace ministry setting could.

So, it was with the help of friends and executive outplacement counsellors in the first six months of 1984 that I realized I had a real opportunity to reshape my vocation.

I admired (The Rev. Canon) Graham Tucker, who was also known as the “Chaplain of Bay Street,” and I wondered what it would be like to serve men and women in their work lives as he did.

The group that came together and charged me with this work had also identified the need for friendship among leaders. They saw my own peculiar history as a friend and as one who connected others in friendship.

We started with a blank page, with a sense of mission to serve the loneliness of leadership, and to offer friendship in Christ to people. But that laid the groundwork for how we made decisions together as a board.

We participated together in a process, which I believe, protected me from myself; even my expense accounts were scrutinized by the treasurer. Looking back, I realize I have had enormous amounts of freedom and flexibility to act as I thought necessary, to travel, and to engage in a variety of ministry opportunities; but ultimately that authority has always come from the group of people who are the Board of Directors of Touchstone Ministries. And if we agreed, and moved in concert with each other, then we knew we were moving in the right direction.

Over our nearly 40 years together (and they have not been without moments of conflict, tension, confusion, and anger on both sides), we have had to work to make sure that we stayed in sync with God and with one another. Through that process—and the kindness and generosity of God—our reputation remains good, the ministry seems to be respected, and we continue to offer and encourage friendship in Christ in ways that are helpful to people.

Thinking back to the beginning, at the time of Touchstone’s inception, I realize that my journey with Jesus to that point had grown in focus and curiosity. I had practices of prayer and study that were helpful. But I still had lots to learn, and enormous need to grow as a follower of Jesus and as a leader and teacher among others.

My Christian experience to that point had been shaped by three key scripture passages. The first, from 2 Peter 3:18, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

Second, from John 15:15, “I no longer call you servants, I call you friends.” And finally, John 17: 20-23 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they ... be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me. ...”

Those three scriptures continued to shape and influence Touchstone throughout the next four decades.

But it was long before Touchstone, almost 50 years ago, that I was first drawn to Jesus’ words, of his majestic prayer in John 17, which I’ve just quoted.

Those words planted the seeds of my understanding that spreading the good news of Jesus often happens by relationships, rather than by proclamation alone. It doesn’t mean that proclamation isn’t part of it—but if people walk together with a respect for Jesus, regardless of their theological position, somehow, our unity and engagement will allow us all to be infected by the person of Jesus. He will draw us into this mystery that is the Trinity, the dance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which in turn, will entice us into their love, individually, and collectively.

Equally critical to how Touchstone developed was John 15: 9-17, “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.”

It was primarily these two pieces that shaped our mission and methods.

Touchstone gave freedom to my “holy” curiosity. We didn’t have a preconceived idea of how we were going to implement a plan for the spiritual development of people. Frankly, we didn’t even completely know what our views on spiritual formation were at that point.

I had spiritual practices at the time, but really, Touchstone has been a journey to try to discover where prayer, friendship, and vocation intersect, how it all somehow, integrates together. An important piece of that was my noodling around the whole area of contemplative prayer, as well as the area of spiritual direction and guidance.

Little did we know when we began that our discoveries would lead us to ancient streams of the faith in several monastic traditions—Jesuit, Franciscan, and Benedictine in particular—and Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Celtic spiritual traditions that have an earthy connection to the infinite.

Nor could we have foreseen that our learning about friendship would lead us to partner with organizations and movements that engaged with justice, poverty, and equality—as friends who were doing similar work, with similar needs in our different communities, but who shared at their heart a hunger for friendship with God and others. We would learn that we were to become not just supporters of these causes, but to use our voices for those who did not have a voice.

As we looked at our blank page, we wondered how to help each other, support one another? How do we build circles of friendship? How do we build circles of friendship that also have some spiritual nurture? How do we build circles of friendship with Jesus at the centre? How do we develop friendships that aren't based just on one mission or a shared theological point of view but grow irrespective of differences?

And how do we help one another know that whether we serve in business, the professions, or lead faith-based organizations or churches, that our work, however mundane or seemingly unspiritual, all has spiritual roots? How does faith shape our professional life? Could we develop the conviction that whether we are a banker, lawyer, accountant, investment person—we are each expressing our God-given gifts?

It took a long time to grow our understanding of spiritual friendship and to recognize the critical connection between quiet prayer and friendship, and so to make quiet prayer an intentional part of our practices. Back in 1984, we knew that men, particularly, found it difficult to build relationships. Men were good at networking in the professional sense but weren't necessarily gifted at listening deeply to one another's lives.

In the early days of Touchstone, we explored what it meant to be a "friend." I looked at countless resources on friendship, studied them, and reflected.

Others considered me a trusted listener; somebody who kept confidences, somebody they could turn to—not necessarily for advice, but as a sounding board. Quickly, my job became to engage people where they were, to come alongside, to be a supportive friend. We provided opportunities or excuses for leaders to slow down enough to say, "Let me take off my mask for a minute and be honest." As my circles of relationship developed, I connected one friend to another, and other circles began. And then others initiated their own circles. And on it went.

Our goal became: To nurture an ever-expanding circle of friends who:

- experience God's love,
- love God in return with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and
- express leadership, which emerges from their identity in Christ.

We did that at most times. But how we pursued that goal changed and grew over time.

In its 40th year, Touchstone is a physical and virtual community of men and women in towns and cities across Canada and on other continents as well as. It's a safe place to explore life with God, a place to discover the voice of God in the presence of trusted friends and companions. Many hundreds connect with us through our website, our podcasts, Monday Thoughts, and seasonal prayer cards. Many more connect in circles of friendship that span years and continue to experience retreats, regular meetings, and dinners together.

We had humble beginnings. Much remains the same. Today, we aren't a big thing, the best thing, or the only thing. But we are something together, as we follow Christ.

As we approach this milestone, I plan to reflect on and reveal what we are and how we got here. And I hope to remind us of those “how’s” in particular, over the coming months: discoveries made along the way that have continued to change and shape us right up to this day.

Over the years, friends and colleagues have occasionally encouraged me to write about my own spiritual journey as it has woven together with Touchstone’s. My response had always been strongly negative.

But then came this one beautiful, end-of-July Sunday morning—gorgeous, clear, crisp. I was sitting in my favourite chair, coffee on the side table, doing my morning prayers, just trying to relax and enjoy the day. I said the “Invocation of the Holy Spirit” from Celtic Daily Prayers, which closes with the line, “Bathe me with the brilliance of your light like dew.”

Then I turned to read a few of Jesus’ “Kingdom of God is like...” parables—in Matthew 13. And on that day, in that place, they became for me “light like dew.”

Jesus had already woven the parables of a sower, the weeds, a mustard seed, and yeast, with some private explanations to his disciples.

But that morning my focus turned to a man discovering buried treasure, a merchant finding a pearl that he had been looking for his whole life, and a fishing net full of fish that needed culling. Jesus caps the discussion about the kingdom of God by painting a picture of a teacher of the law who becomes a disciple in the kingdom. He compares the teacher to a homeowner who has a storeroom filled with treasures, both old and new, from which he can draw for the benefit of others.

And as I meditated, I thought, Maybe I am some of that buried treasure that God found in the field of creation, and God finds something valuable in me and in the work that we have been doing together in Touchstone.

Throughout our history, it has been God’s kindness, generosity, and love—combined with the kindness, generosity, and love of friends—that have allowed me to learn to be a teacher of spiritual friendship, prayer, listening to God, and building community without walls and restrictions.

And as I thought about that, I realized that I have a storeroom of treasures that ought not to be archived or stowed away, as if in a museum to be looked at. Rather, they are tools, treasures, which I have brought out again and again, to help people who are part of our community.

In the months since then, I’ve continued to ponder these treasures and where they have come from. I’ve considered how my understanding of friendship with God and friendship with others has been shaped by seven decades of listening to God, experiencing God, being frustrated by God, being angry with God, and yes, at times being completely confused.

Jesus knew that “kingdom” meant many things to people in his day. It meant power and majesty and control and fear. And he spent his three years of ministry, saying, “The kingdom

of God is like ... Well, it's like a mustard seed. No, it's like a pearl. No, it's like buried treasure. No, it's like a woman who puts yeast in a batch of dough. It's like two brothers who have a different relationship with their father; one walks away early in life and gets celebrated because he changes his mind and comes back, the other walks away from the father amid the celebration.”

The kingdom of God is like this mysterious something that is like a whole lot of things, and it doesn't have any simple, easily understood, correct answer. It's a mysterious thing that we are involved in. Touchstone's covering gave me the freedom to explore these mysteries over the span of our 40 years together.

This Introduction will serve as the first of several chapters recounting that story, which will be released in blog and podcast formats over the coming six months, culminating in a digital book with a small print run. Ensuing chapters will explore the lessons learned and the treasures discovered for our mutual growth in grace and knowledge of Jesus.

It will also lead up to Touchstone's 40th birthday party on June 9th, 2024, when we will celebrate the Touchstone years one last time. Susan, the board, and I have agreed that laying Touchstone down on this milestone birthday seems good and right to do.

You're all invited.