



Pop the Corks & Pass the Butter Tarts

CHAPTER FIVE: PRACTICES OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

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“A man cannot be “friends with” God on any other terms than complete obedience to Him, and that includes being “friends with” his fellow man. Christ stated emphatically that it was quite impossible, in the nature of things, for a man to be at peace with God and at variance with his neighbor. This disquieting fact is often hushed up, but it is undeniable that Christ said it, and the truth of it is enshrined in the petition for forgiveness in the “Lord’s Prayer.”

– J.B. Phillips (1906–1982), *Your God is Too Small*

Two Muskoka chairs side-by-side overlook a lake with mountains on the horizon; this is the image we chose for the cover of my book, *Spiritual Friendship: The Art of Being Friends with God and a Few Others* (Touchstone Ministries, 2012). It’s an appropriate trope; I’ve probably spent thousands of hours sitting with people in lakeside chairs, living rooms, board rooms, bars, golf carts, restaurants. There is nothing particularly religious on the surface of such scenes, but at a deeper level there is something sacred that happens when friendship with God in Christ is the reason we are sitting together.

The reality is that life is hard, and life lived on its own can be profoundly damaging. We all need friends. I need to spend time with people, listening to their lives and sharing their journey, and having them do the same for me. To have lives that aren’t soul-killing, but soul-filling, we need relationships. Obviously, we need the relationship of God in Jesus Christ, but somehow, that all gets lived out in relationship with other people in a way that is life-giving.

It is my conviction that God reveals Himself in Jesus, in Scripture, in creation, and in His incarnational presence in the Body of Christ. That is, God reveals himself in friendships, in the circle of people who are figuring out what it means to be followers of Jesus. It has become clear to me that all the practices I have learned in the process of that pursuit have value, but none are sufficient in and of themselves. Each stage of exploration in my life brought something fresh and new to my knowledge and experience of God. No one tradition or

discipline or practice is the goal of life; they are all just pieces of soul architecture to build a life with Jesus.

The goal is not the practice of disciplines, but rather to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ, and in Touchstone, to do so amid friendship. And yet, if you were to ask me to describe Touchstone's theology of spiritual friendship, I would point to what we do, and then you would understand what we believe.

You see, there are core practices—whether it be on a retreat with a group, or when I am with one other friend, or when two of our friends get together with each other—that enrich the friendship. These practices include prayer and play, eating and drinking, and so much more, because we foundationally believe that God is in all of life.

Time spent with friends often begins with conversation. Throughout the decades I've discovered ways of helping focus conversation when I sit together with friends. It might start with quiet. Again and again, I've seen that being comfortable with silence—however uncomfortable one may feel at first—believing that the Divine Shepherd is present in creation, in one another, and in scripture, and then presenting ourselves to God in view of that understanding allows sacred moments to unfold.

Next, we try to lay down the barriers that distract us from the good God who is present. We try to be open to hear and experience whatever the Spirit might bring our way by attending to the sound of one another breathing, the warmth of the sun, the sound of the birds, the sounds of words being read from scripture. And then we choose to be still in it all without words or immediate response. We aren't creating a commentary; we are trying to have an experience of the living God. Together.

If you go into an art gallery, and spend all your time reading the descriptive texts that typically appear beside paintings in an exhibition, you won't experience the art. Similarly, if we open ourselves to hearing scripture read—without immediately looking for commentary or explanation—we enable our imaginations to be expanded, hearing and seeing what God might have for us beyond the comfortable or expected.

A prayer Touchstone friends use to reflect on our relationships with God and with one another is a friendship awareness prayer. Based on the Ignatian Daily Examen, it includes a series of questions that I can ask God in a private time, sitting with my journal-book at the end of a week or a month. I pray: "God, please bring some things to my mind about friendship." I take time to become aware that the loving God has been present with me throughout the day and the week. I spend time thinking about the times when I've been aware that the loving God has been present to me. I ask for God's light to see the day or the week through God's eyes. "How would you look at this week, God?" Looking back at the week or the month or whatever the time is that I am reflecting on, where did I sense the friendship of God in my life?

Then, I take time to give thanks for those people or opportunities or experiences, because when I pray for people, the first thing I should do, is to give thanks for them, however else I must pray for them. I ask God to bring to my mind the acts of friendship I received during this time. So, it becomes important to be reminded that there was a kindness there, there was a

grace-note there. That person really did something lovely for me.

I ask God to bring to my mind moments when I was truly a friend to another. When was I selfless? When did I lay down my life for somebody else, by not having to impose my agenda or my ideas, and control the conversation, but allow the presence of God to do it? I ask God to bring to my mind moments when I missed the opportunity to express friendship by impatience, judgement, or inattention. It's easy (even though I am in the business of friendship, and spiritual friendship, and prayer) to be so impatient and so self-focussed, that I miss the opportunity to be a friend. Finally, I invite Jesus to talk to me about what I am thinking. What is my friend Jesus saying to me about all these memories?

The core to the whole thing is that Jesus is at the centre (we know that Jesus is at the centre), and our form of prayer is really a way of saying: How do I listen to Jesus? How do I visualize the presence of Jesus here? How do we envision ourselves in the stories of Jesus' life? How do we become followers of Jesus in a real, true way?

But it's not all about conversation and prayer. Whether we are praying together or playing together, eating or drinking, listening to a word from God or arguing about a movie we've just seen; they are all expressions of the presence of God in our lives, and means of experiencing one another with God at the centre. If we go for a walk down a path, or play a card game, if we go to a ball game or play golf—if our relationships are strong, then that playing enhances those times when we are silent, listening to a Psalm, or a gospel story.

Time away from the normal stresses of life is also important. Whenever we get the opportunity to escape—whether it's three hours with a friend or a weekend away—it becomes a form of Sabbath, a time when we are deliberately leaving ourselves open for God to speak to us. We don't know what the outcome will be, but we long to deepen our friendship, and trust the Spirit to work in our lives.

At the centre of it all is looking at the life of Jesus, because he walked in intimate relationship with the Father throughout his earthly ministry.

As Jesus drew the disciples around him, he pulled them into the same relationship. He wanted them to be in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as he is, and to experience the wonderful dance of love and relationship that he does.

Just before he headed for arrest and trial, he prayed this well-known prayer recorded in John 17:

Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world, and I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them, so they can be made holy by your truth. I am praying not only for these disciples, but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one; as you are in me, Father, and I am in you - and may they be in us, so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me so that they may be one, as we are one. I am in them, and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me, and that you love them as much

as you love me.

Anything we do together is to be drawn into that relationship. We are to be conscious of the fact that the Trinity, in their dance of love (what the Orthodox call perichoresis) is a centripetal force that draws us into relationship with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This understanding informs all that we do in the Touchstone community. Jesus tells us in this prayer that he is present in each one of us, as well as in our community—and that somehow, we are interconnected with the Trinity. But at the same time, he is sending us into the world in the same way that he was sent into the world: vulnerable, in a sense, going against the culture. So, we are sent by our Lord and friend, Jesus, into the world as he was sent. We operate out of a sense of call in our work, our family, our service to the world, and causes of justice and mercy.

Our friendship with God and one other is not inward directed. When we understand the kindness of God in our lives, our failures, weaknesses, and fears, that understanding motivates us to do something about the brokenness that we see around us. The healing and help that we receive in our broken and confused places refreshes us and empowers us to go on mission in the church and in the world.

Spiritual friendship—our concept of friendship—leads to us being committed to the fact that we can, as lay people, find ways to nurture the presence of God in one another. We can hear the voice of God in one another, be God's ushers, putting one another in a place to hear an authentic word from God. Of course, we can take responsibility for our own spiritual journey. But in company with someone else we can also be responsible for their spiritual journey because they are a friend.

Our eating and our drinking are also gifts from God. We need food and drink to get through the day, but we need food and drink of a richer sort to find nourishment for all of life. Meals can be sacred places of conversation and intimacy as stories are shared and new things discovered. Meals can be times of raucous problem solving or of quiet intimacy and deep reflection.

At many Touchstone meals, we have read chapters from John 13–17 of Jesus' conversations with his friends at their last meal together before his suffering and death. Doing so shapes a different kind of listening. Having engaged Jesus together we become more conscious of his presence in each other. It makes for a more respectful and winsome exchange of thoughts and ideas.

Many of Jesus' most amazing conversations happened around a table (or a barbeque or at a picnic on the beach) with saints and sinners alike. He enjoyed the hospitality he was offered. In our times centred around food and drink, we are trying to offer him hospitality.

We call Touchstone's retreat liturgy, "Celtic Meal with Jesus." I try to avoid using words like eucharist and communion because they are so closely guarded by various church traditions. Our Celtic Meal involves bread and wine, but leadership at the table is shared, never celebrated by one person. It's a meal that connects with our deepest need for freedom, love, forgiveness, and hope. Eating and drinking in honour of King Jesus has been our tradition.

Our speaking and listening also express this hospitality to Jesus and one another. It takes time and discipline to give one another the airtime that allows us to know real inner journey, and to recognize God's presence in the other. Interruptions are normal in life but not helpful in conversations that are committed to listening and learning. The opposite of interrupting is active, responsive silence. This non-interrupting spirit must infect our time together over meals, conversations, laughter, and reflection.

We believe God is present in our midst, present in each one, and present in our circle of friendship. Quiet, deep, watchful listening sharpens our eyes to see and ears to hear this presence.

We watch and listen for signs of grace and actions of love in the other. Catching each other out in the good we see transforms us from analysis and judgment to wonder, awe, and affirmation.

Weakness and failure are easy to see. It takes eyes and ears of love to discover the good and grace in the other. Our fears, our hopes, our failures, our achievements—the things we are truly asking from God—can be enriching ingredients for listening and speaking with one another.

Our reading and our thinking are also rich resources for one another. We share ideas, books we've read, movies we've seen, and even engage in arguments about them. But then we do a different sort of reading. We read a story from Jesus' life, and release our imaginations to the Spirit, often seeing and hearing things we may not have seen and heard before. These readings often shape ongoing conversations, just because we have opened our minds and souls for the Spirit to lead us in new and refreshing ways.

So spiritual friendship is about enjoying our time together, letting the freedom of the Spirit's interruptions allow us to experience the love of God in Jesus and one another. We pray and play knowing we are empowered by the One who can make us stand without blemish in His presence.

All the hours sitting with individuals and small groups—and of learning from classic streams of the faith in the practice of friendship with God—opened doors to a host of more public-facing opportunities. The next chapter will tell some of those stories.

A TOUCHSTONE TESTIMONIAL

It was in the mid-90's that I first became aware of Touchstone, when Bill Smith, a founding board member of the ministry, invited me to lunch. I did not know Bill—or the other people he invited—but I knew his intention had something to do with bringing together businesspeople of faith from the area.

Through Bill's introduction the Kitchener-Waterloo chapter of Touchstone was born. We came from different churches and vocations—engineers, lawyers, ministers, bankers, therapists, consultants. Our common denominator, which we likely didn't even realize at the time, was that we shared a longing for a different experience of Christian community, an authentic, safe place to share our doubts, questions, and frustrations. Over the years we created a place free of judgment, a place of genuine love and acceptance, all rooted in the Father's love and our desire to follow Jesus in a meaningful way.

Annual fall retreats provided extended times with Norm guiding us into different practices of contemplative prayer. I refer to Norm as “a spiritual Indiana Jones,” who has travelled far and wide to bring back rich ancient traditions for us to learn from and grow.

These practices have been life-giving. One exercise, which initially seemed radical to me, but which has become a favourite, has been to immerse myself in a gospel story while reading it by imagining myself as one of the characters. The stories become alive, more human, more relatable, and deep spiritual truths are felt and known.

On our retreats we typically go off on our own and spend time in silence reading a gospel story before returning to the group to share what we have been hearing and sensing the Spirit saying to us. In this sacred space with trusted friends there are opportunities to ask questions and speak into a person's life gently and with love. It is powerful and transformative.

I remember being struck by one of Norm's comments at an early retreat. As he sent us off on our own for a period of silence, he said that if we found ourselves falling asleep, that was probably God's way of saying we needed a rest. And that was good. This type of language freed us from the compulsion to achieve something on our own and called us to surrender to a different rhythm, one where we were able to listen to another voice, the voice of a loving God who wants to be in relationship with His creation.

- Melanie Reist, Lawyer, Mediator, Morrison Reist Krauss LLP Employment Law

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION:

1. “The reality is that life is hard, and life lived on its own can be profoundly damaging,” Norm writes. Do you agree or disagree? As you think about your own friendships, how have they helped to offset emotional or spiritual damage for you?
2. Throughout this chapter, Norm refers to some of the practices that Touchstone has incorporated over the years in the course of nurturing spiritual friendships. Are there any practices that he mentions that you’ve not tried with friends? Would you like to?
3. Norm uses the illustration of going into an art gallery and reading the little descriptive texts, but missing the bigger point, by not taking time to gaze at the artwork. He likens this illustration to reading scripture without taking the time to reflect and hear God speaking to you through it. As you think about your own practices of prayer and or Bible reading, how does Norm’s point move or challenge you?
4. “We can, as lay people, find ways to nurture the presence of God in one another,” Norm writes. How can you nurture the presence of God in your friends? How can they help to nurture the presence of God in you?
5. Touchstone has made a point of keeping an outward focus at the forefront of spiritual friendship. That is, they strive to use the help and healing each one receives, and turn it outward, to participate in God’s mission for the benefit of others. How does this focus challenge you as you consider your own friendships?
6. Norm writes that “The opposite of interrupting is active, responsive silence.” If you were to intentionally strive to incorporate active responsive silence in more of your engagements with others, how do you think it might affect those relationships?