

## Intro

I read about a study this week that said that having high quality friendships in your life had a greater impact on your overall life expectancy than diet and exercise combined. And by something like a factor of 4. It was not small.

So, needless to say, my new life motto is: bring on the nachos. Just make sure you're sharing them with friends. (Which doesn't even mean eat less of them, go ahead and order two. You'll still live longer. Science says.)

Now this isn't totally new information, we've known for quite some time that social connections are really important when it comes to mental, emotional and yes even physical health. But it was news to me that the impact was THAT significant.

This month we have been exploring together what it really means to have and to be a good friend. Which is not measured by how many "friends" one has, how many invitations to parties, how many swipes, and clicks and likes on social, it's not about "how many" at all – but something closer to "how deep" "how good" "how real and authentic and ultimately how life changing" are the relationships that we are building with our friends. Because having some people who we call friends is one thing, and it matters, but learning how to breathe life into each other, inside of those friendships, that's where the real gold is. And, like most things that matter, it doesn't happen without some intentionality.

So we've been looking at the life of Jesus, through the lens of friendship. And not meaning the cosmic lens of my/your/our friendship with Jesus through the Spirit, but quite literally, on the ground, in the flesh, against the dusty backdrop of first century Palestine... when Jesus walked the earth, how did he friend with his friends? And what can we learn from him there?

In the first week we started by noticing, particularly obvious in his relationship with John, that Jesus was a friend who made sure his friends knew how much he loved them, a friend who used both his words and actions to express deep affection. And then last week we saw with Peter how Jesus was a friend who was deeply committed to his friends, who didn't bail on them in their less-finer moments; when the going got tough he was a friend who stayed, with open arms and open heart.

## How Does Jesus Friend?

Today we're going to look at Jesus' way of friendship in his relationship to a woman named Martha.

Now Martha, along with her sister Mary and their brother Lazarus, were some of Jesus' closest friends. There is a home we see him returning to often whenever he was traveling through Bethany. A number of the key stories of Jesus' life involve these friends, and in each one you can sense the closeness and affection between them. The story I want to look at today is in Luke 10.

**[ONSCREEN]:** As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. (Luke 10:38-40).

Sidebar: Keep in mind, at this point in his ministry, Jesus coming to your home means a TON of people come with him. An entire entourage of hungry, dusty travellers. There was much. to. do. **For** Jesus, and his crew. And Martha was doing it. While Mary was sitting and listening to stories.

**[ONSCREEN]:** Martha came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:40-42)

Sheesh. She’s only trying to feed the guy, dinner doesn’t make itself. She comes to him for help, and instead of agreement and a little support, she gets told that **she’s** off-centre. Does that land with a bit of an ouch to you? This Jesus seems a little crispier than the one who had John constantly referring to himself as ‘the one that Jesus loved’, doesn’t he?

We expect Jesus to call out the Pharisees and tax collectors, but why be so hard on Martha? He’s supposed to be her friend.

This isn’t the only time we see Jesus saying hard words to his friends. In Matthew 16 he calls the 12, who’d left everything to follow him, “You of little faith” (**ONSCREEN: Mt. 16:8**). At one point James and John offer to defend Jesus when people had treated him poorly and instead of thanking them Jesus rebukes them (**ONSCREEN: Luke 9:55**). Another time the same two asked for the privilege just to sit near to him in heaven, and Jesus’ response was essentially “You don’t have a clue what you’re talking about, your priorities are all out of whack, now get outta my face.” (**ONSCREEN: Mark 10:35-45**) (I might have added that last part.) The strongest one by far – and I quote this often to my friends – is when Peter pleaded with Jesus not to allow himself to be killed, and Jesus responds with “Get thee behind me, Satan.” (**ONSCREEN: Mt 16:23**).

Are these words of life? Is this kind and loving friendship, I ask you? Jesus seems to think so. And I wonder if it’s because Jesus has his head squarely around something that most of us find it verrrrry difficult to embrace. That in friendship, love speaks the truth, even when it’s a truth that’s hard to hear. And in fact, saying a hard thing that needs to be said sometimes, does not signal a weakness in a friendship bond, but rather speaks to the strength of it. And if that’s the case... then is there a way to do that, that doesn’t pull us out of love, but actually steps us right into the centre of it?

Let’s look at how Jesus does it.

He actually **[ONSCREEN] 1. Starts with affection**. Did you notice that? He speaks her name, and says it twice. “Martha, Martha.” That’s a tone of tenderness. That’s not an eye-roll, it’s not exasperation, it’s certainly not anger. It’s a compassionate reminder that he sees her, and he knows her. That she’s safe with him. It’s a signal that his heart is soft in this encounter, and he’s inviting hers to be as well.

Next, he **[ONSCREEN] 2. Sees what’s underneath**. “You are worried and upset about many things.” He’s not judging and condemning her there. He is seeing beneath the surface, to the deeper wound-

thing that is driving her to make the poor choice. He sees how she's actually tortured *inside*, and that's turning into destructive behaviour *outside*. That lens is so important.

So, starting with affection, and understanding what's underneath, he then **[ONSCREEN] 3. Says the hard thing.** As her friend he offers a compassionate mirror to where he sees her living into a lesser version of the beauty and strength that she was made for. He loves her enough to say, this thing you're doing is destroying you. And you don't have to. He offers her a kind of honesty and perspective that she maybe can't even reach on her own.

And in his final move, he **[ONSCREEN] 4. Calls her to something higher.** As he shifts her gaze to notice Mary's choice, not as a comparison or competition, but he is inviting her into a brighter vision, a brighter walk. He says there's a different way to live than this harried and harassed internal state you've been operating from. Reminds her of what love and peace and trust look like. Reminds her of who she is, the goodness right in front of her, available to her. And he doesn't just toss off advice at her. He offers her an outstretched hand and says: come sit with me too, I'll journey with you, I'll help you grow into a new way of being.

And that's the thing. See Jesus understands that the gift and the strength of our very best friendships are that they help us grow into the best reflections of the light and love of God that we can be in this world.

So do you have friends who love you enough to tell you what you don't want to hear? Who love you enough to tap into tough love, in those moments when that's what growth requires?

I will tell you a quirky story of one of the most powerful experiences I've ever had of this dynamic.

### RCMP PARE Test

So, fun fact. Fifteen(ish) years ago, I went through the recruiting process to join the RCMP. (And then turned the job down.) One of the steps in that process was an athletic test, set up in a gymnasium with a bunch of weights and obstacles, designed to simulate the experience of having to chase, control and then apprehend a suspect. If you complete the course (6 laps) within the designated time, you pass. If you take even one second too long, no pass for you. If you collapse on the course and stay there (as one guy in my group did), no pass for you.

So, all 4'10" of me summoned all my strength and speed and tore through the first lap of that course. No problem, I got this. Second lap, little harder, it's ok, I've still got this. Third lap, uh-oh, I don't got this. Fourth lap... I'M GOING TO DIE. Fifth lap, I throw myself over the final hurdle and my legs immediately give out beneath me. I am now laying on the floor, gasping for breath. I can't do this. I give up.

When all of a sudden, the coach-guy who's timing the test is suddenly standing overtop of me, and essentially yelling at me. Saying: "DON'T. YOU. DARE. Don't you DARE give in now! Get. UP." And I don't know if that sounds harsh to you. It sounds harsh to me! And it was intense. But it was also so good.

Now I've been yelled at, in my life. I've been shamed, coerced, bullied, demanded of. In strong, insistent tones. It doesn't feel good. It doesn't lead to good. This was something else.

I've also had people just wildly cheer me on in various endeavours, as if I could! do! anything! And that feeeels lovely. But this wasn't that either.

This was something else. It was a strong, insistent, empowering, no-nonsense but also loving CALL, UP into a version of myself I was momentarily unconvinced I could be.

And it feels so weird to put love in that sentence. I know! Cuz it was just some rando athletic guy at a college running tests. But I will never forget that tone in his voice, it was fierce insistence mixed with some kind of loving care that was refusing to allow me to collapse in on myself. It was a yell, but it was a yell TO me, not AT me. I don't think I'd ever heard a tone quite like that, directed at me, before in my life. And not only did it work – it got me up off that floor, and through the 6<sup>th</sup> lap with two seconds to spare... But that experience has stuck with me. That tone has stuck with me.

And sometimes, I think that is exactly the tone we need to find, in our friendships, if we're going to help each other grow.

### Cultivating Friendships Of Growth

Do you have the kind of friends who won't just leave you where you are? Who will (strongly) call the best out of you, when you want to shrink down into something lesser? Do you know how to be that kind of friend to your friends, without turning into a jerk, or wielding your perspective like a weapon? This is a call into life, from a foundation of love, it's a partnering practice of empowerment. It's only honesty, when it's immersed in compassion.

And too often we shy away from it – or we get defensive against it – but this is what love looks like. In both giving and receiving. It's not always an easy dance... but it is completely possible.

Friendship at its best is friendship that helps us grow.

And that means it **[ONSCREEN]: Calls out the hard stuff**. When we see the lesser things that someone we care about is giving themselves to. The lesser vision, the lesser version of themselves, when we see them missing the light of Jesus right in front of them, a friend calls that out, in love. Proverbs 27:17 says **[ONSCREEN] “You use steel to sharpen steel, and one friend sharpens another.”**

And this is a good thing, it's such a healing thing. James 5:16 says **[ONSCREEN] “Make this your common practice: confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed.”**

When we pull the crappy stuff out of the shadows, and into the light with each other, we give it a chance to be loved, and healed, and that's the only place from which it can ultimately be let go of. And we need each other, for that to happen.

So love doesn't bulldoze in judgment, but it also doesn't hold back, in fear. Real friends call out the hard stuff, yes. In order to help each other grow.

And they also **[ONSCREEN]: Call to the higher stuff**. It's not just about naming what's off-center. It's about helping each other see and step into the actual centre of a Jesus-saturated life. It's painting a picture of both the goodness you currently see inside of your friend, and the higher potential they are right on the edge of. It's about planting courage in each other, in a way that helps us step into the deeper, richer, brighter lives of love that God longs for us to experience.

I see this incredible strength in you. You're right on the edge of it. So C'mon. Dig deep, and bring that thing all the way up and out into the daily existence of your life. Don't you dare give up now. Friends can do that for each other. Be that fierce-gentle voice. If we'll have the courage and love, and intentionality, to do it.

It's way too easy to let friendship just kinda float along, up on the surface, to live lives of 'friendliness' with each other, without ever diving deep enough to become actual friends to each other. In a way that helps us both grow.

And as hard as it is to embrace the courage to BE that kind of friend to our friends, it's maybe even harder to be open to receiving it for ourselves. To cultivate the kind of humble-hearted openness necessary within, to receive this kind of care when it's given to us.

To learn how to dial down our own defenses, when a friend offers us a supposedly-compassionate mirror that maybe doesn't feel so compassionate in the moment. But which probably has a lot more honesty and love laced into it, than our tender ego wants us to believe.

Is this dynamic a part of your deepest friendships? Could it become so? I'd even go so far as to say maybe this needs to be a cards-on-the-table conversation. Do you have friends to whom you'd say: I love the kind of person you are. And I know you help me to become a better person – a more whole person – myself. And I just want you to know, I want that. Even if and when it might make for sticky moments. I give you permission to speak truth into my life, because I know, with you, it is held in a crucible of love. Will you help me, to call the best out of myself, when you see me settling for something else? Like can we actually give each other this kind of permission.

## Wrap Up

I'd pay actual money to have that guy yell at me again, so scary insistent and yet loving. It was such a moment. As he helped me tap into the me that I was losing there, on the floor. Cuz I'm in danger of losing me there on the floor all the time. In my life. And were it not for the friends who see me clearly enough, and love me deeply enough, to say "Nu-uh, Mandy. Not like that. This is not who you are. Dig deeper." I'd be lost.

For every single one of us, our hard and holy calling, beautiful and terrifying, is to help lead each other to life. While eating nachos.

And it requires immense courage, immense humility, immense tenacity to learn to friend this way. AND immense grace. Boatloads of grace. To both give and receive this kind of love. Because we will not do it perfectly. It will be messy. Guaranteed. But it'll also be worth it. And the gold it will produce in our lives, and in our world, will be unspeakably beautiful, the more we give ourselves to it.

Jesus has given us a deeply good path to follow: 1) Hold each other in deep affection. 2) See the wounded part(s) beneath whatever's happening on the surface. 3) Compassionately speak the truth in love. 4) And then call (& help carry) one another to something higher.

This is friendship. This is love. And we can do this. And our lives, and the world, will change dramatically when we do. Let's follow Jesus in this, and just see both what kind of people it forms us into, and what kind of friendships it just might grow in our lives.