

# Reclaiming the Role of Friendship

## *Hitting Refresh*

21.01.17 | Jeff Martens

I remember one of the loneliest experiences in my life, at least up until that point of time, was when I was attending university, right here in Niagara, at Brock. And you might say I had a bit of an odd experience of university. Having been born and raised here in Niagara and then still living at home while attending school, I actually didn't feel much need for additional connections and relationships in university life since I still had family and friends in the area. Because of this, to no one's fault but my own, I never really plugged into the social life of university. I simply drove to Brock, I attended my classes, submitted assignments, did exams, the whole thing. Got in the car, drove home, all until I could put that (now) dusty degree filed away in our basement. But because of this, in the moments between classes, when I lingered the hallways or the courtyards of the campus, I often kind of felt quite alone while I was at school.

As I look back on those moments, I am fortunate to realize now that my loneliness was kind of fleeting at that time. It was really only circumstantial, just kind of limited to those hallway moments. For me at the end of the day, I think all those lonely moments at that time, they really just sort of fueled the fire for cheesy lyrics for my then emo rock band. You see, I think there's a difference between not being around people and not actually having people. At those moments at Brock, I just wasn't really around anyone I knew or connected with. But in the grander scheme of things, I was still fortunate to have people I was close to in my life at that time.

Now, if we take it to our experience today, things we're living through, obviously throughout the pandemic, being around people has been as complicated and as restricted as ever in our lives. I know it's contributing to feelings for some of us of loneliness, isolation and disconnectedness, well beyond cheesy lyrics. So, as we are seeking to hit refresh right here at the beginning of 2021, that's what this whole series is about. I think it's also worth considering not just what the pandemic has caused but also what it's revealed about the status of our

relationships and more particularly our friendships. That's why we want to talk about this week. It makes us ask the question: "How can we make sure we still have people, even when we can't be around people?"

I remember way back in the early weeks of the pandemic that some sensationalists were describing this as an "apocalypse" of sorts, which wasn't making any of us feel any better. Right? But what's interesting about the word "apocalypse" is that it actually means "revelation." It's a revealing of what's behind the curtain, what's actually at the root of our reality, especially when it's put to the test. And as we think about all the stresses and restrictions we've been under in this year of our lives, most significantly in our inability to socialize and be around one another, I can't help but wonder what this apocalypse-like experience has revealed about our friendships. A few observations I've felt in my own life. I think I've seen in some, others I've heard from many of you in recent conversations, is most of us might say we have quite a lot of relationships or kind of relational connections and networks of some sort (if you think of your Facebook friend list). But when life and relationships are really narrowed down, I think we might say we only truly have a few solid friendships, that that's a much smaller category.

Maybe in the past, we have settled more for being around people than doing the work of truly having people. Further still, and where we are going to focus in the conversation this week, is that when the rubber really hits the road, and life pushes us to our limits, when we're stressed and tested like never before, I think what's been revealed is that even fewer of us have what the scriptures call "helpmates," helpmate friends. So, we're going to talk about how truly sharing and mutually benefit from some of the deepest journeys of life. In Genesis 2: 18, which is a verse we've referenced many times, speaking in and about relationships, and it comes after God has created the vast majority of the universe. He's declared the wonderful near perfection of everything. We come across these words in Genesis 2: 18, it says this:

***Then the Lord God said, "It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him."***

***GENESIS 2:18 [CEB]***

They came up a “helper that is perfect for him.” I want to focus on this word “helper” in this conversation. What's interesting about this word helper is that the original word from the original Hebrew language was far more robust and complex and nuanced than I think of how we tend to think of a helper today. You might hear helper and you think of the kid down the road who you pay 20 bucks in the summer to mow your lawn. But this helper was describing a kind of companion that I think goes way beyond anything we are all that familiar with. You see the original Hebrew word here was actually a compound word made up of two distinct words, the words *ezer* and *k'onego*.

You guys are saying those from wherever you are, just to help them stick, *ezer* and *k'onego*. *Ezer*, meaning “to rescue, to save or to provide strength,” essentially a strength beyond what you could have on your own. Help or support that is beyond or outside yourself. And *k'onego* means a likeness or a correspondence that this help, although it's outside of yourself, it's actually not unlike yourself. And this is why commentators often say that the best English word we have to translate this is this word “helpmate.” That this is a helper who provides a help that is most needed, but it's also a mate who is not unlike or unfamiliar with the needs of the one they help. They provide a help, but they're very familiar with the sharing and they probably, or might even have, some of the very same needs that they help meet.

And although God said it would not be good for a human to be on their own, to be alone, that we would need helpmates, when you think of this one - two punch of *ezer* and *k'onego*, it doesn't mean that people by themselves have no strength or ability or that the helper is some kind of unfamiliar superhero that comes in, swoops in and is stronger than the one they help. It's just that God knew that people might not be strong enough to carry the weight of the world on their own. And then we're actually stronger and better when we live with and as helpmates, helpmate friendships.

You can think of it this way. In the fall, my brother-in-law asked if I would help him move a piano, which is everyone's favorite, favorite favour to be asked, am I right? Now obviously he knew he couldn't move it by himself, but he thought if he got me and his brothers that would make four of us, and that might be enough. I

don't know when the last time is you tried to carry an upright piano, but even with the four of us, we wildly overestimated our collective strength. You know, we got to the house where we were going to pick it up. We quickly realized we weren't going to have much success trying to move it down the hallway that was there, over the threshold, down the porch stairs and into his trailer. But thank goodness, after a few moments of kind of over-analyzing things (we were mumbling to one another, "Oh, it's probably just more awkward than heavy, right?"), thankfully the father in the household from where we were getting the piano got home from work and he kind of saved the day. Not just by adding one more set of what were obviously insufficient biceps to the equation, but he ran to a shop and found some wood that he was able to use to make handles we could actually put in the back of the piano. He grabbed some two by fours that we could use as leverage boards to get it over the threshold and helped us actually get this thing out and into my brother-in-law's trailer.

And at that moment, he became a temporary helpmate to us. Not that he couldn't move the piano by himself either, but he joined us in the process. He provided help resources and outside of ourselves, so we can all get through it together. That's an example of helpmate. And we're talking about helpmate relationships, helpmate friendships, to help you face what you can't face on your own, to carry together what neither of you could carry alone and to actually help each other become or be transformed into something more and better than either of you could be without the other person. The beauty here is that helpmates play a role not just in difficulty, but also in the joys of life, to share in and contribute to and enhance our highlights, not just to make the lows more bearable, but to actually make the highs higher. You know, if you picture a bird soaring, like some of the images we saw in last week's service. With two wings together, a bird can soar. Any bird with just a single wing can't even get off the ground. But with two wings its heights are unlimited. That's just another picture of what a helpmate is.

And so, the question today, deep into this revealing experience of the pandemic, is: "Do you have a helpmate? Not just relationships, not just family, people in our household that we live near or work with, like we talked about more last week. Not even just a group of friends, the kind of people you're normally around, when that is permitted. We need all of those, but the question is: "Do you have people,

or even just a person that you are pursuing God's intended vision of helpmate friendship with?" And the question can be asked another way, whether you have someone who plays this kind of role in your life and for your life, but also are you being a helpmate to someone else? Because here's the thing. Helpmate friendship is intensely mutual. Like trying to carry a piano, or a bird spreading two wings to fly, you can't really have a helpmate without also being one. At their core helpmate friendships are intensely mutual. So the question is: "Do you have a helpmate and are you being one to someone else? That's what I want you to reflect on this week.

However you're answering that question right now in your head or in your heart, maybe you're confident in and grateful for the helpmates you have, or maybe you're feeling a bit doubtful and afraid of your awareness that this is a kind of relationship you are still just longing for, as we are seeking to hit refresh together in all aspects of our lives in 2021. I think if we're going to reclaim the power of what friendship and community is meant to be, I believe we need to pursue and be helpmate friends. The dynamics of helpmate friendship this year, like never before, that's the bottom line for our friendships. So how do we actually do this? Now, continuing our personal assessment of how well we are, or we aren't already doing this, I want to point to Jesus, at first, as our model, as our "how to," that he intentionally and consistently pursued and modeled helpmate friendship.

You see Jesus was a guy that drew a crowd. Throughout his life and ministry, there were often crowds following him, sometimes even badgering him. With the fan ship and influence that he established, he no doubt had, and I would say still has, far more relational connections than we could ever imagine. But what's fascinating when you look at Jesus, about how he related to or shared the more intimate parts of his life with the crowds, is that he actually didn't. In fact, we often see him described as trying to escape the crowds, trying to pull away with his closest companions (who were known as the 12 disciples), because I believe Jesus knew the difference between being around people and actually having people. Further still, within the 12, Jesus actually had his three friends, Peter James and John, who essentially became his inner circle and were involved in the most revealing parts of his life and ministry on earth. And what's more, not because I think Jesus was a guy who played favorites, but one of the gospels even describes Jesus as having one disciple that Jesus loved more than all the others.

And who was a friend who, by the end of Jesus's life was so much of a friend he was actually living like a brother.

So, if we're going to follow Jesus, and that's where this whole series started, that's what this whole life of faith is about, we have to ask ourselves like Jesus, do we have a 12? Or do we have a three? Or do we even have at least a one with whom we are sharing in and living out this kind of helpmate friendship together. And to be clear, especially in a life of faith and following Jesus, this is again a unique kind of friendship because it has a spiritual dimension to it. If God intends for us to follow and become like Jesus, then the truest form of a helpmate friendship is one that is always pointing us to Jesus and behaving like Jesus to one another, affecting and infiltrating every single part of our lives.

So, with Jesus as our model, I'll ask you just a few more helpmate assessment questions. Let's reflect on these ones together:

Do you have someone who knows and sensitively cares for and speaks into your fears and insecurities, all of them and their depth?

Do you have someone who shares in and regularly encourages your passions and your dreams and the difference you're trying to make in the world?

Do you have someone who you confess your mistakes and sins to, and you ask them to pray for your healing?

Do you have someone who knows your full financial system situation, that sees your books, speaks into the way that money and stuff can be the greatest competitors with God, for our heart's affection?

Do you have someone who you regularly ask to tell you the hard truths, to call the parts of your character and your attitudes, your behaviors that should still be refined?

And do you have someone who asked you how things are going in your following of Jesus that is regularly asking about Jesus's role in your life and in what ways he's inviting you to follow him more fully?

And once again, not only do you have someone to carry this weight of friendship in your life, but are you being this kind of helpmate, friend, to someone else?

Now, a couple of nuances here. To those who are married, speaking to some of the household relationships we talked about last week, you might say this person is your spouse, and there's definitely truth to that. But if you're not married, you may think that this kind of sounds like the kind of relationship that's only possible in a marriage. But the truth is, I think Jesus modeled a kind of helpmate friendship that's superseded marriage. If you didn't know, Jesus was never married. So, for those of you who are married, I'd want to say to you your life needs to include helpmate-level friends outside of your marriage that ask about your marriage, that speak into your marriage, that help you become an actual better spouse, to your spouse.

And for those who aren't married, I want to encourage you to say, I think there's opportunities to experience even deeper levels of helpmate friendship being freed up to do so in your life, like Jesus, not just with a one, but maybe with a three or even a 12. Some other challenges to this conversation, for some of us, we might be feeling like we might be feeling all this sounds great, but that this is kind of a pointless conversation in the midst of the restrictions of COVID, and I feel the heaviness of that. But I want to tell you the truth that I think helpmate friendships require a ton of work, even in the best of circumstances. And in this time, where we need it as much as ever, where we can't easily be around each other, we must be making the effort and leveraging the opportunities and picking up the phone, knocking on the doorstep, booking the FaceTime call, taking advantage of these technologies to pursue helpmate living with someone in our lives.

Especially in a pandemic, maybe we can't have, or don't need dozens of helpmates, but we need to be pursuing this with at least one or two people. I get that some may be feeling that this just can't be possible. Pandemic or not, maybe it sounds good, but it kind of feels unrealistic or that so much of this sounds a little bit like *social faux pas*, or that it might require taking potential friendship-killing risks if you were to go this deep. And frankly, I have to say to us this week that I think that's what makes Christian helpmate living so painfully rare for so many of us. Because it's something that is, in fact, supernatural, that Jesus wants to invite us into and empower us to live this year. And true, it's a kind of relationship that I'd say beautifully cuts against the grain of our sort of common social norms.

We've been reading after the Sermon on the Mount through this past month. Like many within our community, I've been struck with how often Jesus says "you've heard it said, but I say to you." When you think of our social norms, our common experiences of friendship, when we're evaluating the status of our friendships here at the start of this year, and many of our relationships, I think Jesus and the scriptures want to say a few things to us. Maybe things like this: "You've heard it said, you need to have it all together and deal with your own crap. But I say to you, confess your sins to each other and you will be healed," or "You've heard it said, if someone is dragging you down or disagrees with you too much, you need to move on. But I say to you, accept one another, and don't break your relationships," or "You've heard it said, you have to look out for yourself. But I say to you, bear one another's burdens. You've heard it said, you need to please everyone, keep everybody happy. But I say to you speak even the hard truth in love so that we can all grow up together.

You've heard it said, busy-ness is a badge of honor. But I say to you, true friends are available at all times.

You've heard it said, don't talk about money (that's not to be brought up in our friendships and relationships). But I say to you don't think of anything as your own.

You've heard it said, real friends won't challenge you, or they won't make you uncomfortable. But I say to you as iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend (probably sparks and all).

You've heard it said, time heals all wounds, which caused us to avoid conflict and exacerbate our pains. But I say to you, if you've been hurt, or even if you think someone has been hurt by you, don't even go to church a little easier. These days don't even go to church before going to them to have an honest and hard conversation that actually brings healing.

And you've heard it said, a friend will probably only go so far. But I say to you love one another to the same extent as I have loved you, as Christ is, so we can be to one another.

Friends, this is a glimpse of helpmate living. I know this is not easy. As a pastor, I may have as many kinds of relational connections and networks as any of us. But in all of those, if I'm frank with you, sometimes it can be hard for me to be vulnerable enough, to truly experience, helpmate-level friendship, to be that with and for another. And sometimes I know it's a little extra complicated, for myself,

and I know for others in the context of our community, given my life has a leadership responsibility with others. And here's the thing. I want to fight for this. I want to have this. I want to become this. I need this in my life. And I want 2021 to be the year where I, and all of us together, actually tap into the rare air of God-intended, helpmate friendship that produces the goodness and the togetherness that we need now more than ever.

So, who are you going to pursue a helpmate friendship with this year? My application or challenge for you is to pick at least one person in your life that you can have a January conversation with to say you want to at least explore being helpmate friends together. You can unpack some of these dynamics and commit to that this year. And if you're not sure where to start our Life Groups can be a great place to point to this kind of relationship. They won't necessarily hand deliver a helpmate-level friendship for you, but they're a place to experiment with it, to learn more about it, and start practicing it with some others so that it can pour into the rest of our actual lives.

To wrap up, wherever we're at with having or being, or not yet having or being helpmates, here's the good news I want to leave with you. Remember those words *ezer* and *k'enegro* that make up this word helpmate in Genesis? What might be most amazing about those words is that, throughout the scriptures, the most common use for them is when God refers to himself as our helpmate. You see, no matter how alone you might feel in this time, and no matter how far we still have to go, having and becoming helpmates this year, right now and throughout the process, God, through Jesus, wants to be our mate. On the last night of his pre-resurrection life on earth, Jesus said to his followers that he now calls us his friends. So much so that he would extend the greatest act of loving friendship and helpmate rescue by laying down his life for all of us.

No matter the status of your friendships today, may we not forget that Jesus remains our ultimate helpmate, our *ezer* and our *k'enegro*. May you know him as your helpmate and allow him, through you, to have and to be helpmates with others this year.

Amen.