

2nd Opinion: Practice friendship as God's gift

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The other day, my son described the playground antics of a little girl named Candace. It was obvious Candace is quite a live wire, and he finds her extremely amusing. As the stunts she pulled off grew more outrageous, I asked whether the teacher hadn't objected. "She's not in my class; she's on TV," was his response. In his imagination, the cartoon world was as real as the schoolyard.

Of course, imaginary friends are a typical phenomenon of childhood, but increasingly they seem a fixture of the adult world. For instance, beaming faces that read the news or traffic reports on television appear as real to us as the people across the street. They even use language of "community" to describe the relationship between themselves (as well as their sponsors) and us. Perhaps they seem more real.

This is not surprising. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon observed we live in a society where "we are kept detached, strangers to one another as we go about fulfilling our needs and asserting our rights."

This hit home not long ago, when our children wandered into a neighbor's yard, eager to jump on their trampoline. When I asked the mother if it was OK, she responded, "Promise you will not sue me." Like this mother, all of us are easily caught up in cultural forces that tear us apart, detach us from commitments to people and places, and lead us to focus on "my rights" over yours. Our imaginations regarding true friendship or neighborliness have become impoverished.

The church recognizes something of this. It is common to emphasize the "relational" nature of what the outsider/visitor/potential member will find

within a particular congregation. And churches compete to proclaim themselves more friendly or open or inviting than their competitors.

I wonder, though, whether we've done the hard work of discerning what true friendship means.

This is not a new challenge. The Greek philosopher Aristotle distinguished three kinds of friendship.

First are friendships of usefulness. People are friends because of the good they get out of it. Examples include business partners or neighbors who own dogs and become friends because they "dog-sit" for each other.

Second are friendships of pleasure, where people are friends because of the pleasure they get out of it. They're friends because they enjoy the same movies or hobby.

Are these really friendships, when it sounds as if you're simply using the other for what you need or for pleasure? Aristotle would answer "yes," since these friendships bring people together. You know your neighbor, her name, the dog's name and a lot more. You do an activity with someone else versus sitting alone in front of your TV. You're not strangers.

While counting these as friendship, Aristotle contended "such friendships are easily dissolved. ... The affection ceases as soon as one partner is no longer pleasant or useful to the other."

So, he described a third, more binding friendship—a friendship of virtue, where friends share a common vision of the good. The virtue each sees in the other brings them together. Hence, Aristotle's familiar quotation—"a friend is another self." We choose friends based on what is most important.

Friendship is at the heart of Christian discipleship. In a well-known passage from John 15, Jesus says, "I do not call you servants any longer, because

the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.” Jesus continues, however, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

This later point distinguishes Aristotle’s Greek friendship from Christian friendship. As Augustine emphasized, we do not choose our friends; God does. It is not simply our virtue that draws us together. Rather, God brings friends together, a sign of God reaching into our lives and working on our behalf.

Augustine imagined church friendship as a school of Christian love. Such friendship is not turned inward. It is the place we learn the practices and virtues necessary to expand our lives, hearts and minds so we can welcome the stranger.

In a world where we have increasingly become strangers to one another, let’s imagine the difference between being “friendly” and practicing friendship as a gift from God.

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