

The Four Great Friendships, Part 2: Friendship with Neighbor

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Niantic Community Church
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Scripture: Matthew 22:34-40

I. Why We Experience God in Our Friends

If God is love, and in such a way that anyone who knows love also knows God, and anyone who does not know love does not know God (1 John 4), then all experiences of love can rightfully be called “God experiences.” The next time God seems distant to you – way “up there” in the clouds somewhere, or too busy with more important matters than you – just ask yourself, “When is the last time I experienced love from someone, or for someone?” This is the last time you had a “God experience.” Is it any wonder that when Jesus is asked what is the most important commandment, he says that, besides loving God with heart, mind, and soul, we need to love our neighbor as ourselves? Love of God and love of neighbor are flip sides of the same coin.

In early 2021, while COVID was raging and worship was exclusively via Zoom, I created a Children’s Reflection focusing on one of my best friends in the world, Scott Griessel. In the following video, see if you can identify the various ways my experience of friendship with Scott could also be said to be a “God experience.” [See video here: <https://tinyurl.com/4zfnm4cj>]

Video Transcript (lightly edited):

Hey kids! Today's subject is friendship and how we experience God through our friends. Now, this is one of my best friends in the entire world, Scott Grisel. Scott and I have been all over the world together. Here we are in Scotland ... and Spain. Scott took his wife to Spain, and I took my wife with them in March, 2020.

Throughout most of Scott's adult life, he was a video producer making television commercials, for instance, for car manufacturers. But Scott, at one point, wanted to give back to the community more, so he and his wife decided to do a lot of free work for nonprofits. A nonprofit is an organization that is focused more on doing good in the world than making money. In fact, a church is a nonprofit. Scott was wanting to do this more, and that's when I got to know him. Consequently, we got involved in a lot of projects together, like he went on the walk I helped lead across the country in 2006 with a bunch of folks and made a documentary film about it. (*The Asphalt Gospel* © 2007 Creatista Productions)

Scott was also the video producer for an internet television program I was a part of at my church in Omaha, Nebraska called Darkwood Brew, where we broadcasted a television-like program over the internet and interacted with people from all over the world who were watching.

Scott's great love, though, was photography. One of the things he did to make a living as a photographer was he took pictures of people and then those pictures would appear in magazines and newspapers, and even on television. That's called "stock photography." Once I saw a photograph of his father-in-law, Don, on the Jimmy Fallon comedy Show!

Scott's favorite way of being a photographer was just to get out on the streets and shoot people doing interesting things. Here's Scott, when we went to Spain, just waiting for the next magical moment to appear and show us things that we may look at, but we don't really see about people – their lives, their loves, their oddities, people just having fun. He didn't just notice the magic in adults. He saw it in *children* too.

Once we went to North Carolina to participate in a festival called the Wild Goose Festival. Once again, Scott's Eye wasn't just on adults but on children. One day it began to rain and kept raining and kept raining. Most people began to shelter inside their tents or their other lodgings. But Scott knew that for some people, the more rain there is, the more fun they have! Take a look at these two girls and the magic that Scott captures ...

Scott always seemed to see more than most people do, including myself. Even when he would photograph me, I would see things in myself that I never really knew was there. One thing about good friends is that we see each other in the best times and in the worst times. We see the really fun and positive things in our friends, but we also see the ways they're challenged as well.

Scott had certainly seen me in the best of times and in the worst of times, and I saw him that way too. That's the thing about friends. We get to be around each other enough to really get to know and see who a person is and realize that they may not be perfect, but there's so much of God's light in our friends that those imperfections don't really matter.

An old Spanish saint who lived in the 16th century, Theresa of Avila, once said, "What a great favor God does to those who God placed in the company of good people." Our *friends*! There was a reason she said this. Theresa saw more than just human beings in our friends. She saw in the goodness of people the spirit of Jesus.

Theresa wrote once that Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes. You are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

We certainly experience all this in our friends. Theresa reminds us that our friends experience the spirit of Jesus in us.

How about you? How do you experience God through your friends? That's a question worth talking with your parents about some time and asking them the same question.

[End note: Scott died on December 1, 2020 after being diagnosed with a brain tumor just a few weeks after our trip to Spain nine months earlier.]

When I reflect on this video, I see a number of ways I have experienced God through my friend, Scott. I experienced God's kindness in Scott's kindness; I experienced God's generosity in Scott's generosity toward me and others; I experienced Scott's creative spirit as God's own invitation to me to engage joyfully and creatively with the world.

Where God's love shined through even more was in Scott's ability to recognize and capture the kindness, generosity, creativity, and playfulness of others. The delight Scott took in other people mirrored God's own delight.

Where I experienced God perhaps most profoundly wasn't through these warm and fuzzy things, however, as glorious as they were. As I hint at in the video, Scott knew me better than most anyone else on earth. Therefore, he saw me at my best and at my worst. He was there beside me when I had some of my most brilliant, creative breakthroughs, yet Scott was also around to witness to my darker moments.

We also had our philosophical disagreements. There are some parts of Scott's belief system that always drove me crazy, and certain parts of mine that he experienced the same way. There were times when we flat out disagreed with each other about a wide variety of things and couldn't understand why the other was being so stubborn and dense as to not see things our way.

Yet, despite seeing the worst parts of each other, what kept us together as close friends was the light we saw that outshined the darkness. Isn't this exactly the way God sees us? No wonder friendships convey "God experiences" on so many levels! And no wonder friendships are so important!

II. Where Have All the Good Friends Gone?

Yet friendship is in sharp decline in the United States. Really, it is in decline throughout most of the industrialized world. People used to think that the growth of Facebook and other social media would reverse the trend toward disconnectedness, but there is growing evidence that such things are having the reverse effect.

The highest users of social platforms are Millennials and GenZ – yet they also experience the highest sense of loneliness. According to a recent report by the Survey Center on American Life, nearly 30% of all Millennials and GenZ youth experience feelings of loneliness either every day or a couple of times a week.

Overall, while majority of Americans have two to five close friends, a full 21% of Americans – 2 in every 10 – have just one close friend or no close friends.

According to the Surgeon General's recent report called "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," about half of all Americans reported experiencing loneliness – and this was before the pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems.

Given the connection between friendship and our experience of the Divine, is it any wonder that increases in loneliness and social isolation have run parallel to increases in atheism and spiritual "nones"?

"Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling," writes the Surgeon General. While he doesn't make a connection between loneliness and spirituality, he does note a host of ill effects caused by loneliness (and, I would add, lack of spiritual engagement): He writes, loneliness "harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death." (p. 4) In fact, loneliness and social isolation "increase the risk of premature death by 26% and 29% respectively." (p. 8)

Amazingly, loneliness is as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more lethal than consuming six alcoholic beverages a day, according to the Surgeon General. It is also more deadly than obesity and physical inactivity.

Of course, loneliness doesn't just have spiritual, emotional, and physical effects. It also has a societal effect. Increasing isolation leads to increasing distrust of others. How much of our political polarization is caused by mistrust of others? In 1972, when Americans were far less isolated, 45% of Americans felt they could reliably trust other Americans. By 2016, that number had dwindled to roughly 30%. (Do you imagine the number has gone up or down since 2016?)

In a recent New York Times article by Nicholas Kristof titled, "We Know the Cure for Loneliness. So Why Do We Suffer," Kristof notes that a full quarter of the children who rode the No. 6 school bus with him in Yamhill, OR, as a child have died from drugs, alcohol, suicide, or other so-called deaths of despair.

Writes Kristof, "These pathologies are linked with social isolation. I've seen how old friends self-medicated with meth or alcohol in part because they were disconnected from the community, and then addiction and criminal records left them even more stigmatized and isolated."

Kristof also notes that even though the Great Depression of the 1930s was economically devastating, the mortality rate didn't rise but actually fell. "Why didn't we have more deaths of despair in the 1930s?" he asks. "I think in part because in the 1930s there were community institutions – churches, men's clubs, women's associations, bridge clubs, bowling leagues, extended families – that buffered the pain and humiliation of unemployment and economic distress, and in some cases these groups actually stepped up and became more active during times of distress. Those community institutions have frayed. Now we're on our own, and perhaps that's why so many are also dying alone."

I used to think that I could lose all my friends, but as long as I could sense God's presence, I would be okay. Now, I realize that the two aren't so easily separated as I used to think. To the

extent that we are feeling increasingly isolated from other people, we become increasingly isolated from our sense of God's presence, power, and love in our lives. Is it any wonder that loneliness can lead to greater depths of despair?

III. NCC's Greatest Gift to the World

Here's where all this talk of God, friendship, loneliness, and social isolation matters for Niantic Community Church.

Ever since arriving here last December, I have heard people continually claim that NCC needs to be engaged in mission. Several of you used to work with prison ministry, but COVID shut that ministry down. Several of you serve meals and otherwise help the homeless in New London, but there could be more. Several show up for the Pride Parade every year, but there could be more. Still others have been working for racial justice and to promote greater recognition of Indigenous Peoples, yet we could do a lot more.

Curiously, in the time I've been here, not once have I heard anyone name what I consider to be NCC's most fundamental mission activity – and the one in which you participate in impressive numbers. It's as if you are completely unaware that the mission even exists here!

I'll give you a hint at what it is, if you haven't figured it out already. What if I were to tell you that your mission activities are creating the health equivalent of reducing people's smoking by 15 cigarettes per day, and reducing their drinking by six drinks per day? What if I were to say that your mission activities reduce people's risk of heart disease by 29%, their risk of hypertension by 36%, and reduces the risk of dementia by 50% among our older adults?

What if I were to tell you that your mission work has just as dramatic effects on reducing depression, anxiety, and the risk of death by suicide?

Of course, I'm speaking about the power of friendship that exists at NCC. You are amazing at both developing close friendships and maintaining them. Friendships directly combat both loneliness and social isolation – and promote all the positive benefits we've just heard.

According to the congregational survey you recently filled out for the Pastoral Search Committee, a whopping 40% of you say that four or more of your closest friends attend NCC. Most people in American society would count themselves lucky to have this many close friends in the whole world! 60% of you have two or more of your closest friends here. And nearly 75% of you count at least one member as one of your closest friends.

These numbers are quite remarkable. What is just as remarkable is that, despite all these close friendships, newcomers don't experience you as clique-y, or unwelcoming of visitors or unaccepting new members. You welcome them all, and draw them right into the heart of things.

If I were you, I would not be lamenting how few people are involved in mission that meets real, painful human needs. While I would definitely continue to encourage people to participate in more traditional mission projects. Yet, I would also be celebrating the fact that NCC is

participating dramatically in addressing what is finally being recognized in wider society as the most significant social, political, spiritual and health crises in our nation!

If I were looking for a permanent minister, as you are, I would be looking for someone who would work alongside the Associate Minister you just installed this morning to pour gasoline all over this fire. You love to walk and hike. Why not form some walking and hiking groups, inviting the public to join you? You love to cook. Why not form some gourmet groups and invite more of your wider circle of friends into them? A bunch of you enjoyed playing pickleball together a few weeks back. Why not paint a pickleball court or two in your parking lot and form a league? Some of you enjoy a frothy beer or glass of fine wine once in awhile. And a number of you enjoy Bible Studies. Why not hold an official NCC Bible Study at a local pub?

Hmmmm, you may not have to wait for your permanent minister before one of those pub Bible studies forms. Be looking for an announcement soon!

When Jesus is asked what is the most important commandment, he says, “You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The more friendships you create, the more “God experiences” you generate of the highest order. And the more faithfully you address not only a great spiritual crisis in our community, but a health and human welfare crisis as well. All while fulfilling Jesus’s greatest commandment – and having the time of your lives while doing it!