

FINDING FRIENDS ON PURPOSE

Series: On Purpose
May 3, 2015
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Relationship, Friendship
Genesis 2:18

Dan Cathy is an American businessman - the President and COO of Chick-fil-A, one of the largest fast food chains in the U.S. And back in the summer of 2012, he found himself in the midst of controversy over some comments he made opposing gay marriage. While conservative groups rallied around Chick-fil-A and supported them in the most American way possible - by eating more fried chicken - pro-LGBT groups picketed, boycotted, and began raising awareness of Chick-fil-A's anti-gay stance.

One of those groups was Campus Pride, an organization led by a self-professed life-long activist for gay equality, Shane Windmeyer. Windmeyer and his group waged war against Chick-fil-A, not only because of Dan Cathy's comments, but because of the millions of dollars his company donated to conservative Christian organizations deemed to be anti-gay.

Dan Cathy and Shane Windmeyer were enemies. They stood on opposite sides of a massive culture war taking place in America. Each held contempt for the other. Each saw the other as a blight on humanity.

Then, something unusual happened. Here it is in Shane Windmeyer's own words:

On Aug. 10, 2012, in the heat of the controversy, I got a surprise call from Dan Cathy...I took the call with great caution. He was going to tear me apart, right? Give me a piece of his mind? Turn his lawyers on me?

The first call lasted over an hour, and the private conversation led to more calls the next week and the week after. Dan Cathy...would reach out to me as new questions came to his mind.

*His questions and a series of deeper conversations ultimately led to a number of in-person meetings with Dan and representatives from Chick-fil-A. He had never before had such dialogue with any member of the LGBT community. It was awkward at times but always genuine and kind. **It is not often that people with deeply held and completely opposing viewpoints actually risk sitting down and listening to one another.***

What an unusual thing! Dan Cathy reached out to his arch nemesis. And Shane Windmeyer reached back. Windmeyer goes on to say:

Through all this, Dan and I shared respectful, enduring communication and built trust. His demeanor has always been one of kindness and openness. Even when I continued to directly question his public actions and the funding decisions, Dan embraced the opportunity to have dialogue and hear my perspective. He and I were committed to a better understanding of one another. Our mutual hope was to find common ground if possible, and to build respect no matter what. We learned about each other as people with opposing views, not as opposing people.

When I first read Shane’s account of the growing friendship between himself and Dan Cathy, I thought, “Yes! This is what the world needs more of. We need to stop making villains out of those we disagree with, and instead, engage in conversation and even friendship with them.”

Others obviously didn’t have the same reaction. ThinkProgress writer Zack Ford questioned why, if Cathy and Windmeyer had become such good friends, Chick-fil-A hadn’t changed its corporate policies to be more inclusive and encouraging of the gay community. He wondered aloud why Cathy, having spent time discovering the humanity of the gay community, wasn’t changing his business practices.

And I can understand that response. For someone who sees LGBT equality as a human rights issue, the main thrust of the argument is that members of the LGBT community are, in fact, human beings who need equal rights. So, once Dan Cathy became friends with a gay man, he should have agreed. That seems like a reasonable conclusion for someone coming from Zack Ford’s perspective.

On the other side of the argument was the response of Peter LeBarbera, President of “Americans for Truth.” In LeBarbera’s words, Cathy’s dialogue with Windmeyer was an example of a “pro-family conservative selling out in the culture war over homosexuality” and that “Cathy ‘sold out’ all those good Americans who...had rallied by the hundreds of thousands to support his right to speak out for God’s natural design for marriage...because [they] were sick and tired of people of faith being silenced by homosexual militants and their pro-LGBT media enablers.”

Do you get that? He “sold out” to “homosexual militants” because he dared have a friendly dialogue and ultimately friendship with a gay man. If that is what we in the church believe, then we might as well stop calling ourselves the church of Jesus. Using LeBarbera’s logic, Jesus was quite the sellout as well - selling out to violent revolutionaries, government lackeys, Roman soldiers, prostitutes, adulterers, lepers, religious leaders, crazy people... and the list goes on.

As I said to a friend on Facebook the other day, if the church can't handle "different," then it isn't the church of Jesus. If we can't befriend people with whom we disagree, then there is very little Christ-like about us.

Today, we start a new series called *On Purpose*. And this morning, I want to talk about something I think is at the core of all we do and hope to be as a church and as people of God: *Finding Friends On Purpose*.

But first, let me pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

Prayer

Genesis chapter 2 is the first time we read in the Bible that something is not good. After creating the universe and everything in it, and after saying over and over, "It is good," now, in chapter 2, verse 18, we read that God says something is not good. What is it?

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Genesis 2:18

The first thing in all of God's creation that was not good was that this man he created was alone. He didn't have a companion. He didn't have a person-to-person relationship. He didn't have a friend.

We were created to have friends. Loneliness is a brutal but preventable illness. And I say illness because studies have shown that loneliness - not having friends - contributes to emotional feelings of isolation, depression, lack of concentration, and even more physical ailments. A recent UCLA study found a link between loneliness and underactive immune systems. When we don't have friendships, our bodies literally begin to shut down. We need friends.

Greek philosopher Aristotle said,

"Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."

Aristotle

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

*"Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (for God did not need to create). It has no survival value; **rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.**"*

C.S. Lewis

In other words, even if you had everything else in the world, life wouldn't be worth living if you didn't have friends.

Now, I can hear some of you saying, "Well, I don't really need friends." Yes you do. Yes. You. Do. If you think you don't, you know what that's called? Arrogance!

Where I'm from in the U.S., there's a high value placed on what's called radical self-reliance and the self-made person. The heart-cry of the self-reliance crowd is, "I don't need anyone! I can do it myself!" But that's just arrogance and pride. The truth is, you *do* need other people. Imagine what your life would be if you took away every single person who has helped you along the way. Parents? Gone. Teachers? Gone. Mentors, Authors, Leaders you looked up to? All gone. Not to mention all the people who engineered, manufactured, and crafted the places you live, the roads you drive on, the tools you use. And what about those who settled lands and formed governments? There is no such thing as a self-made man or woman. We all need each other.

And when it comes to our day-to-day survival, researchers have discovered that friendship or the lack thereof is one of the key advance indicators of longevity - in *anything*. We simply aren't living sustainable lives if we don't have friends.

But the thing about friendship is that you can't just sort of sit back and hope people will befriend you. Pastor Rich Nathan puts it this way, "You cannot choose to *have* a great friend, but you *can* choose to *be* a great friend."

And that's what I want to hone in on this morning. How do we *become* friends with the people around us? Friendships don't just happen. How do we find friends on purpose?

Well, I think a good starting point is something that you'll hear me talk about from time to time around here - being centered set. And we'll be looking at this concept each week of this series, because it is truly at the core of the kind of church we want to be - the kind of people we want to be.

So, what in the world is *centered set*, particularly as it relates to friendship?

Well, think of it this way. Centered set, in some ways, must be understood in relationship to its counterpart - *bounded set*. These are concepts borrowed from the world of mathematics. And bounded set says this: there are certain criteria that must be met in order for, in this case, a person to be included in the set.

You can think of a bounded set as a circle - a boundary. And we human beings can be represented by dots all around that circle. Some of us are outside the circle, so we aren't

part of the set. Others are inside the circle - they meet all the criteria, so they get to be part of the set.

And we see this approach to friendships, don't we? For a guy like Dan Cathy, if he was operating with a bounded set mentality, a 40 year old, gay, married, pro-LGBT campus activist would be far outside of his set. Most conservative Evangelical Christian men wouldn't even *consider* investing in a friendship with someone like that. Our bounded sets keep us apart.

But what I want to encourage you to do today is to take a different approach - a centered set approach. Centered set, you can think of as that same set of dots, except now, instead of a boundary separating the "ins" from the "outs," we have an ideal center. For us, the ideal center is Jesus. Not only does he represent God, but he also represents the perfect human being. In any part of my life, if I become more like Jesus, I'm drawing closer to God *and* I'm becoming a better person - more like who God made me to be.

And with a centered set approach, it's all about movement. What direction am I moving in? You know, someone who is really close to the center might be moving away. Someone really far away from the center might be moving toward the center.

Look at these two dots. They're both basically moving the same direction, but one is moving away from the center and the other is moving toward. In a *bounded* set, this one that's moving toward the center would still be an outsider - not welcomed in yet. She's becoming more like Jesus, but when she shows up at the bounded set church, or when she starts hanging out with bounded set friends, she will quickly understand that she doesn't yet belong.

But when it comes to friendships, I think becoming more like Jesus means becoming more like a centered set. It means tearing down those boundaries that divide "us" from "them". It means welcoming all and realizing that we're all in different places on our journey. It means seeing other people as equals, as companions on a journey, and as co-contributors to this experience of life.

With a centered set approach, we have the ability to welcome different kinds of people into our life - to become friends with a vast variety of people, which in turn, enhances our own experiences, challenges us, sometimes deepens our convictions, and other times makes us reconsider long-held conclusions - it makes us better people and, I think, has the ability to bring us even closer to the heart of Jesus.

OK, so that's our starting point - this centered set approach that says, "You know what? My friendship domain is open to anyone. They don't have to tick all the boxes on my checklist in

order for me to reach out to them. In fact, somebody who doesn't really tick any of my boxes could end up becoming a close friend." That's where we start from.

And then, we sort of look at how friendships develop. You know, you're probably not going to meet somebody today and say, "You know, I think this person is my new best friend. I think I'll reveal all my deepest, darkest secrets to this person." If you do that, you might need to seek professional help! That's not a healthy approach to relationships!

The *normal* way friendships happen takes time, it takes intentionality. And usually, it looks a little something like this:

Stranger > Acquaintance > Friendly Acquaintance > Friend

With everyone we meet, we start out as strangers, right? We don't know them. We don't know anything about them. We've never met them. That's how we start out. Then what happens? We meet them! And once we meet them - once we know their name, maybe some other basic information about them, then they aren't really strangers anymore, are they?

I meet new people here at church all the time. And once I've met them here, if I see them in town, they are sort of in a different category than all the strangers in town. Once I've met someone, then if I see them in town, I might wave. I might stop and greet them. I might ask them about their week. Even though I may not know much about them, they aren't strangers any more. They've moved into this new level of relationship called *Acquaintance*.

And it's not hard to get from stranger to acquaintance, but a lot of us still don't do it. Like, we'll see the same people in town all the time, but never make any effort to move them out of the stranger category - to even say hello, to learn their names or the most basic information about them.

You see, while it's easy to for someone to go from stranger to acquaintance, it still takes a little effort on our part. What it takes to go from stranger to acquaintance is this: *Intentionality*

We have to be intentional about engaging with other people. We can't walk through life with our head down hoping that nobody sees us. If we want to have any relationships at all, we have to be intentional.

You know, I've had a few people say to me, "You guys have been here less than a year, but I feel like you know way more people than I do." And what they're really saying is, "You have more acquaintances than me." And I kind of take pride in that - like, I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. But at the same time, it's really sad. Like, so often, I know two people who have lived in the same town in Kenya for 5, 6, 10 years, who have similar passions, who have similar experiences - sometimes they're even *from* the same place - and they

don't know each other. That's sad. We have to become more intentional about moving people from stranger to acquaintance.

And it's a super low-risk move! We're not committing to a deep, long-term investment. We're not inviting people into our most intimate friend zone. We're just welcoming them to no longer be a stranger in our lives.

Intentionality moves us from stranger to acquaintance as we invite others, expand our social circles, and welcome people into at least the outer edges of our lives. Jesus did this all the time. He was an inviter. And even though he had more acquaintances than he knew what to do with - thousands at some points in his life - he always recognized the importance of reaching out and inviting others into his life.

It was important to *them*, so it was important to *him*.

So, we move someone from stranger to acquaintance through intentionality. Then, once someone is an acquaintance, then what? The next step in the journey is to *Friendly Acquaintance*. What's a friendly acquaintance?

A friendly acquaintance is someone about whom you can say, "This person is not a stranger. I've met them. And they aren't just an acquaintance, because I really know about their life. I know more than the basic info. I've at least got a good picture of their story. I know their background, their family. I know at least a few things that make them tick - their passions and abilities. I like this person and want to spend more time with them."

That's what a friendly acquaintance is. And that's the zone that many of us erroneously call "friends." When we think of friends, we think of people we hang out with, we know about their life, we like being around each other. But really, what we're talking about are friendly acquaintances.

And we need lots of these. If you think of this friendship pathway kind of like a funnel - to mix metaphors. Or, if you're a hiker, this is kind of like the paths you'll see up just about any mountain. Wide at the bottom and narrow at the top. The further you walk along this path, the fewer people are traveling with you. The path gets narrower.

So, obviously, the stranger end is quite wide. There are a *lot* of strangers in our lives. Then the path narrows a bit as we look at acquaintances. It narrows even more into friendly acquaintances. But still, at this point, it's pretty wide. It's good to have a lot of friendly acquaintances in your life. Some research suggests that at this friendly acquaintance level, most of us can handle about 150 people - that is if we really want to be able to keep up with them and their lives. So that's less people than the acquaintance category, but still a pretty big group.

And what moves us from just acquaintance to *friendly* acquaintance? Well, it's really all about *Time*. As we spend time with people, we get to know more about them, about their family, about their story. And over time, we begin to determine for ourselves whether or not this is someone I like spending time with. You know, we all have a limited amount of time, so, there might be some people that we're like, "You know, I just don't really like this person that much."

That doesn't mean I shouldn't love them like Jesus loved people. But it does mean that maybe I'm not going to invest the same amount of time and energy into this relationship as I might into others. That's OK. Some people will stay at the acquaintance level. And you'll discover who those people are as you spend time with them.

But you'll also find some people with whom you actually *enjoy* spending time - people who give you energy - people you care about in a deeper way. You're moving along the path in your relationships with these people. And a friendly acquaintance can actually remain a friendly acquaintance for years - even decades. You can get together for meals and activities, your kids can play together. In fact, most people that you spend regular amounts of time with will stay in this category - friendly acquaintances. You might call them friends - and that's OK (it could be a bit awkward to say, "Hey Steve, meet my friendly acquaintance John") - but really, that's what they are: friendly acquaintances.

So, we move people from acquaintance to friendly acquaintance by spending time with them. Again, this is an intentional thing. Melody and I love to have people over to our house for dinner. And it's a very intentional way of spending time with people. We meet them. We learn basic information about them. Then we invite them to our house. We invite them into our lives. And over the course of even a few hours, when we spend that time together, we get to know a *lot* about these people.

But you have to invest the time if you really want to move people from acquaintance to friendly acquaintance. Then what?

Next is *Friend*. What is a friend and how do we make them? How do we get people to this stage? Well, first of all, *friend* is a stage of mutuality. You can't have a true friend who doesn't *want* to be your friend. That doesn't work. That's called being a stalker - when your "best friend" doesn't really know who you are. That's bad.

But assuming there is some mutuality here - which comes out over time as you develop your relationship in that acquaintance to friendly acquaintance stage - assuming both parties want to continue down this pathway, there's one big scary thing that will take someone from being a friendly acquaintance to being a friend: *Vulnerability*

Ooh. I told you it was scary!

You see, a friend is someone that doesn't just know all the facts and figures about you - someone who doesn't just know your kids names or your favorite sports team. A friend is someone who doesn't just know *about* you. A true friend is someone who *knows* you. In a friendship between two people, both sides know and are known.

Author Elbert Hubbard says,

"A friend is someone who knows all about you, and loves you just the same."
Elbert Hubbard

Friends are the ones we really open ourselves up to. They're the ones who know our struggles. They're the ones who sit with us and encourage us in our darkest times. They're the ones we turn to in times of joy and in times of sadness.

Friends are the ones we invite over even when the house is messy, when the kids are being brats, when we haven't gotten out of bed in three days. And the way we move from friendly acquaintance to friend is through that kind of vulnerability that all at once makes us really free to be ourselves, but also really open to being hurt.

And that's why so many of us have so few friends.

Remember I talked about that funnel - about that narrowing path that starts out with a whole bunch of strangers and then narrows as we go along. And by the time we get to the *friend* end of the path, that sucker is narrow. And it *should* be. Most people who are really healthy relationally will only have 5 or 6 people who qualify as true friends. That's OK.

But for some of us, we're so afraid of being hurt - either because we've *been* hurt before or just because we've see it happen to other people - that our pathway doesn't just narrow, it *ends*. It ends before we reach the summit of the mountain. The funnel comes to a point and doesn't let any people through. We refuse to be vulnerable with *anyone* for fear that someone will hurt us.

And here's the truth. People *will* hurt you. Sometimes even very close friends will hurt you. But you know how you get through that? By having *other* friends around you to encourage you, to process with you - friends you can be vulnerable with even when - or *especially* when - you've been wounded.

As counter-intuitive as it may seem, our best defense against betrayal is to be vulnerable with a small, select group of people - people who have walked this entire pathway with us -

who know us and are known by us. That's how we will thrive in life. That's how we'll navigate all the ups and downs, ins and outs of this world.

Vulnerability is what makes us friends. And we desperately need friends.

So, that's all the personal stuff. But how does it relate to this church? I told you that in this series, we would talk about where Trinity Vineyard Church Nakuru is headed and how we hope to get there. So here it is:

We want to be a church where authentic relationships are fostered - where people move from stranger all the way to friend without ever feeling like they have to be anything other than themselves. We want to be a place where not only are all people welcome, but that people from very different backgrounds, with very different perspectives, and even diametrically opposed, deeply held convictions can come together and not just co-exist, but like Dan Cathy and Shane Windmeyer, can develop true friendships.

Right now, we have a great group of acquaintances and friendly acquaintances. It's time we become friends.

How do we get there? Well, one of our core drivers is that our church will be relational rather than organizational. That means we aren't going to spoon-feed some top-down relational construct. Instead, the onus is on each person, individually, to invest in the kind of relationships we've talked about today.

Some of you have asked us about the possibility of mid-week gatherings, home groups, bible studies, and the like. And you know what, those things are great! But you know what they mostly are? They're containers for relationship. They're constructed ways of pulling people together in hopes that something will click.

Here's what I would love to see. What if we just all became really intentional about investing in relationships? I mean as intentional as we might be about hosting a bible study or a home group? What if we set aside on our calendars a few hours a week to intentionally meet new people, or to intentionally invite new acquaintances to dinner, or to intentionally get together with one or two people with whom we can be really vulnerable?

Here's what that looks like for my family. We're working on our own schedule of how to find friends on purpose - and it will probably take some tweaking here and there to find something that works and is sustainable. But what we're going to try is this: One night a week, Melody and I will spend time at a local bar and meet and talk with whoever comes in there - making space in our lives to move people from stranger to acquaintance. Then one night a week we'll invite people over for dinner at our house - moving people from acquaintance toward friendly acquaintance. Then at least a couple times a month we'll get

together with a few people who are quickly moving into that friend category - people we can be vulnerable with and who can be vulnerable with us. That's our plan. When I talk about finding friends on purpose, I mean it. Intentionality, purpose, and planning.

If that sounds like a huge investment of time, it is. But friendship is worth spending time, effort, and resources to make happen. That's how we're trying it for our family. Your approach might be different. But the end result that we hope to see in this church is that we have deep friendships *within* the church, and that we have deep friendships *outside of* the church - that when people hear the name Trinity Vineyard Church Nakuru, they'll think 1.) Those guys seem to know everybody, and 2.) That is a really friendly group of people - not cheesy friendly, but like, people I think would be good to hang out with.

If we are doing these things well, then it should be no problem for us to walk out God's vision for this church in Nakuru. If, as they say, getting things done in Kenya is all about who you know, then let's go get to know some people, and let's do some God things in the city of Nakuru.

Let's pray.

We're going to close today with a time of personal response. And there several ways to respond:

1. Singing

We're going to sing some songs together that help us reflect on some of these things.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

2. Prayer

If you need prayer for anything at all, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

3. Communion

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember the way he willingly died for us. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us.

We have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

4. Giving

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

Closing Prayer