



The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Community

- Introduction

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

With its traditional emphasis on group activities, youth ministry cries out for reflection on the meaning of Christian community. How will we create a cohesive community among the youth in our congregations? What do we do when exclusive cliques threaten the health of the youth ministry? How will we engage young people with the wider faith community and with the communities in which we live? Should we try to draw adolescent loners into the youth group? What tools can we offer young people as they engage with other faith communities or communities from other nations?

Theological reflection on community is foundational for addressing these questions faithfully. The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture provide such reflection. Rather than offering simple steps for building community in your youth group, these lectures use the lenses of friendship, moral formation, reconciliation, and the African Christian concept of communal salvation to shed light on the meaning of Christian community and how it relates to ministry with the young.

- 2007 Lectures

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The Promise of Friendship and the Practice of Ministry

• DAVID J. WOOD

We live in a paradox. No culture has ever had such a sophisticated means of communication and yet, according to a recent study, social isolation seems to be on the upswing.¹ The study was implemented in 1985 and again, for the sake of comparison, in 2004. Here are some of the notable findings of the developments between 1985 and 2004:

- Those reporting four to five discussion partners went from 33 percent to 15 percent.
- The number of those who discuss important matters with a spouse increased from 30 percent to 38 percent.
- Particularly surprising was the drop in the percentage of people who talk to at least one person who is not kin, from 80 percent to 57 percent.
- The number of people who have someone to talk to about matters that are important to them has declined dramatically, and the percentage of the American population who feel isolated has increased, from 25 percent to 50 percent.
- The findings show that computer technology tends to foster a wider, less localized array of weak ties rather than the strong, interconnected confidant ties measured in the survey.

Robert Putnam, in his landmark study *Bowling Alone*, concludes, “Across a wide range of activities, the last several decades have witnessed a striking diminution of regular contacts with our friends and neighbors. We spend less time in conversation over meals, we exchange visits less often ... more time watching and less time doing.”²

In the previous lecture, I focused attention on the impoverishment of friendship from within the history of Christian thought and practice. What these studies are revealing is that the impoverishment of friendship is no less in evidence in the culture at large. We live in a time that is ripe for a revival of friendship as a primary form of Christian love. In this lecture, I intend to sketch out a more robust understanding of friendship than is current in most of our communities—Christian or otherwise. I will then speak directly to the promise of friendship in relation to youth pastors and to youth ministry.

Aristotle remains a generative starting point for a robust definition of friendship. He identifies friendship as “indispensable for life. No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods.”³ According to Aristotle, there are three fundamental forms of friendship: friendships of use, friendships of pleasure, and friendships of character. Friendships of use and pleasure are most common and easiest to identify in our lives. These friendships are positive and laudable. In these friendships, however, we love another for reasons external to the friend. When the shared use or

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pleasure wanes, so does the friendship. What we lack is a view of friendship that corresponds to Aristotle's third and highest form of friendship—friendship of character. In friendships of character we love the other because of who they are, in and of themselves. This is not a static or stoic form of love but is dynamic and creative of the very character in which is grounded. The essential marks of this form of friendship, as explained by Ralph Potter, are:

1. Voluntariness
2. Mutuality and reciprocity
3. Esteem and goodwill
4. Common activity
5. Sharing of inner life
6. Continuing commitment
7. Positive affection
8. Equality
9. Virtue⁴

Reflecting on Aristotle's category of character friendship, Potter concludes,

My thesis is that such friendships are good for us individually and, at the same time, also benefit the entire community by functioning as schools of virtue and love from which we emerge better instructed concerning what it takes to co-exist with others. New sensitivities to others are formed. A better sense of our possibilities and limits is attained. Our sense of self is stabilized and enhanced. We are, if all goes well, better persons and better citizens. Our capacity for social intercourse, in all settings, has been upgraded.⁵

John Cooper, in his essay "Aristotle on Friendship," summarizes two arguments in *Nicomachean Ethics* for why it is, in Aristotle's view, that friendship (particularly the friendship rooted in character) is so critical to one's thriving.

Aristotle argues, first, that to know the goodness of one's life, which he reasonably assumes to be a necessary condition of flourishing, one needs to have intimate friends whose lives are similarly good, since one is better able to reach a sound and secure estimate of the quality of life when it is not one's own. Second, he argues that the fundamental moral and intellectual activities that go to make up a flourishing life cannot be continuously engaged in with pleasure and interest, as they must be if the life is to be a flourishing one, unless they are engaged in as parts of shared activities rather than pursued merely in private; and given the nature of the activities that are in question, this sharing is possible only with intimate friends who are themselves morally good persons.⁶

The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre provides a modified version of Aristotle's typology of friendship that I think is helpful in identifying the diverse experiences of friendship that mark our journeys.⁷ Like Aristotle, he proposes a three-fold typology.

1. Accidental Friendships: In these friendships, we are bound to one another in mutual pleasure or utility. This connection does not rest upon who a person is as much as in experiences that are shared. Once those experiences diminish, the connection withers and the friendship is easily displaced. The fundamental condition of these friendships is one of "impermanence." Even so, these friendships can endure for some time and can even develop to a deeper stage.

2. Timely Friendships: These friendships originate at a point in our lives when we face a choice or a series of choices that will be determinative of what kind of person we are going to become and what kind of life we are going to lead. These friendships help us become better persons not simply by offering advice, but also by exemplifying a way of life and participating with us in shared activities. "A timely friend excites us

by making us aware of the possibilities that we confront at just this moment in our lives.”

3. Enduring Friendships: These friendships cut across time and reach to the depths of who we are. As McIntyre describes it, “the life of each friend becomes an integral and constitutive part of the life of the other...something that can only happen over a period of time and that, once it has happened, will only be terminated by death or by physical separation.”

In summary, McIntyre relates and contrasts the three experiences of friendship in this way: “In accidental friendships in one way and in timely friendships in another the friend matters to one because of the impact that she or he has on one’s life. In enduring friendships, which may well have begun as accidental or timely friendships, the friend has an impact on one because of the degree to which and the way in which the friend matters to one.”⁸

Friendship is a profound form of love in our lives. As these reflections suggest, it does not come in one form. What I find helpful about these various descriptions is that it helps us to locate and appreciate the variety of ways friendship affects our lives. If everybody is a friend, then we will not recognize and treasure true friendship. If only the closest of confidants is a friend, then we will fail to appreciate the love we experience in countless ways in the course of our lives. Liz Carmichael, in her book on the history of friendship in Christian thought, put it this way: “Two things are disastrous: to have too high and narrow a doctrine of friendship, making it exclusive, or to forget friendship altogether in pursuit of universal neighbor-love.”⁹

Too often, it has been assumed that the introduction of love as agape by the early church made the classical tradition of friendship obsolete. It is more accurate to say that the introduction of love as agape both connected with existing notions of friendship and significantly revised them. The paradigmatic shift in the understanding and practice of friendship from classical thought to Christian thought is this: from a perception of friendship as a relationship exclusive to the domain of virtuous men to the practice of friendship as a relationship characteristic of an ever-widening circle of men and women who are bound together by their common commitment to Christ. Augustine names this transformation of friendship when he writes, “Though they cling to each other, no friends are true friends unless you, my God, bind them fast to one another through that love which is sown in our hearts by the Holy Ghost.”¹⁰ In making the connection between the love of God and love of friendship, the Catholic theologian Jean Leclercq highlights the tradition that sees friendship as the love exemplified in the Garden of Eden and in the love we anticipate in the fullness of heaven. “It has proved possible to see friendship as a residue, a symbol, of that charity which existed before the first sin—a charity that was spontaneous. Now charity has been made difficult by antipathies and enmities. Particular friendship preserves something of that original charity.”¹¹

For our purposes, I would like to focus on the relevance of friendship to the flourishing of our vocational lives as pastors and conclude with some final reflections on how the lens of friendship might shape our practice of ministry—particularly ministry with youth.

Those who are called forth in the life of the church for the purpose of special ministry share, in the particularity of that calling, a particular potential and need for the cultivation of friendship. With the vocational life of pastors in view along with the particular demands intrinsic to that life, let us review the goods of friendship and their importance to the characters of those in ministry—lay and ordained. How does our work in ministry illuminate the goods for friendship?

In cultivating a knowledge of God. Revelation and relationality are inextricably bound up with each other. As important as time alone with God is to our knowledge of God, the testimony of scripture and the church is that life together mediates a love and knowledge of God that we cannot attain in solitude. We need to recover, in our practice of the spiritual life, the importance of time with particular others—those with whom we share a mutual love and trust that is characteristic of friendship—in our understanding and experience of God.

In cultivating a knowledge of self. Acquiring and maintaining a truthful perception of oneself is essential to the prac-

tice of ministry. Friendship is essential to the cultivation of self-knowledge. We need others if we are to know ourselves. In many ways, we come to know ourselves as we are known by others. Paul seems to indicate that heaven is the fulfillment of this kind of knowing: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). As I noted in the previous lecture, we have come to believe in the strongest possible terms that self-knowledge is best mediated to us by perfect strangers (such as therapists and counselors) who refuse to be our friends.¹² Truth and love are closely bound in the Christian imagination. Knowledge of self is an achievement and not a given—or more accurately, it is a gift. More often than not, it is a truthful knowledge of oneself that discloses to us the gift that is friendship.

In cultivating a knowledge of intimacy. Ministry necessarily involves one intimately with a variety of persons. The more attuned one is to appropriate intimacy—particularly in the context of relationships not defined by the boundaries of marriage or family—the greater one’s capacity to recognize and avoid inappropriate intimacy. Developing a healthy sense of boundaries in the indeterminate zones of relationality that characterize all ministry depends upon the experience of vital bonding with others. Not having friendships of character will leave you vulnerable to using youth to meet your need for friendship.

In cultivating a capacity to deal with conflict. If we are to be capable of not taking everything personally, there must be someone with whom we can share our lives personally, without fear. We must have relationships that will help us to work through conflicts—conflicts that arise in the course of friendship as well as those that arise in the course of ministry. At the heart of friendship is the freedom and trust to speak and to hear the truth.

In cultivating the capacity to model friendship. If friendship is to be recovered as a practice central to the character of Christian community it will be due in no small part to the capacity of leaders to bear witness to the practice of friendship in their own lives.

Building upon these reflections on the deep relevance of friendship to the life of the youth minister, I would like to end by making the direct connection between the practice of friendship and the practice of youth ministry.

1. Youth ministry is face-based community. At the center of all you do is the practice of face-to-face community—calling young people to be together in love. A worthy aim for every youth ministry is the flourishing of friendship. Teaching about friendship as a form of Christian love will help to create a broader vision and practice of love and intimacy than will ever be discovered in the culture at large and in youth culture in particular.

2. Friendship is not a program, it is a practice. It is not a technical quick fix that will jump-start your youth program. There is a tendency in evangelical Christianity to presume intimacy too quickly and thus to render the category of friendship, where such intimacy is developed over time, irrelevant. I can recount numerous occasions when I have been called upon as part of an audience at a conference of one sort or another to turn to my neighbor and share the deepest struggle with temptation I am facing in my life. Being in Christian community does not in and of itself create the conditions for intimacy. Friendship is slow and lingering. Friendship is a gift, whether given or received. The most you can do, and this is a lot, is to create the conditions where love of friendship flourishes.

3. Do not condemn cliques. Or at least, do not fail to appreciate the need of youth to connect meaningfully and in particular ways with certain others. On one level, the cliques can be viewed as arrested forms of friendship. It is not out of the question that cliques may contain the seeds of friendship. Use cliques—these natural, spontaneous, often highly immature forms of bonding—as a stage for learning. Cliques will inevitably fill the void of friendship in a youth group.

4. Friendship is not the exclusive work of youth ministry. Friendship is the work of the church. Youth in their passion for friendship can become the flashpoint for the practice of friendship in congregational life.¹³

However, for the youth to grasp the power and promise of friendship, friendship must be no less in evidence in the life of the church. Friendship is not a youth thing. It is a central practice of the Christian life.

5. Technology is not the enemy, neither is it a friend. For all the power technological devices exercise in everyday life, they remain devices. However, the less relationally rich our lives are, the more vulnerable we become to employing these devices in ways that increase and deepen our isolation. Placing ourselves hours on end before a machine that emits light and enables us to travel anywhere at any time and to communicate with anyone about anything is a “thing” loaded with idolatrous potential. Lives centered by the practice of friendship have the power to marginalize technology and limit its use in our lives. The reality of friendship can counter the hyperreality of cyberspace. Do your youth have a vision of friendship that is not centered by technology?

6. You are not super-friend. Cultivating the conditions for the practice of friendship in your ministry with youth is not in any way to be equated with your becoming everyone’s best friend. Furthermore, as I noted earlier, the more rich your life is in terms of friendship, the less vulnerable you will be to using youth ministry to compensate for your own relational needs. Having said that, forming friendship ties with youth in a way that leaves space and creates the capacity for them to form friendships with their peers is critical to your ministries.

In the movie *Shall We Dance*, Susan Sarandon plays a wife who has reason to believe that her husband is having an affair. She hires a private investigator to tail him. He does and comes up with information that, in his mind, strongly suggests her suspicions are valid. When he reveals this information to her, it leads to a conversation between them about why people get married in the first place. The private investigator gives the predictable answer of romance and companionship which, in his mind, explains why so many marriages end. The wife disagrees and proposes her own insight: “We get married because we all need a witness to our lives.” It is true isn’t it? We all need a witness to our lives. Without such a witness, we live in a crushing anonymity—even though we move day in and day out among countless others. Without the witness of friends, we walk alone in the uncertainty that someone cares enough to see us truly, to know us for who we are, to love us in the particularity of our lives. At the heart of the Christian gospel is the conviction that God in Christ is the witness to our lives. What is Christian community if it is not the place where we come to know we are not alone through the love of Christ in the gift of friendship? One day we will know and be fully known. Until then, we have friends.

1. Miller McPherson and Lynn Smith-Lovin, "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades," *American Sociological Review* 71 (June 2006): 353–75.
2. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 115.
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1.
4. Ralph Potter, "Friends and Other Relations," unpublished lecture delivered at Occidental College (April 3, 1996). In this lecture, Potter summarized Francis Bacon's view of the goods of friendship: "First, it allows us to discharge the emotional swellings of our hearts to thoughtful, well-disposed persons who take turns in speaking and listening. Second, the dialogue of friends helps to correct our perception and judgment. Friends serve as mirrors which enable us to gain a more accurate knowledge of ourselves and our actions. Finally, friends provide practical services in spots where we could not act on our own behalf."
5. *Ibid.*
6. John M. Cooper, "Aristotle on Friendship," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 330–31.
7. Alasdair McIntyre, "What Both the Bad and the Good Bring to Friendships in Their Strange Variety," in *Amor Amicitiae: On the Love that Is Friendship*, eds. Thomas A. F. Kelly and Philipp W. Rosemann (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2004), 241–55 (esp. 251–55).
8. *Ibid.*, 254.
9. Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 198.
10. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.4.7.
11. Jean Leclercq, "Friendship and Friends in the Monastic Life," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly Review* 24, no. 4 (1989): 297.
12. My point here is not to diminish the importance of therapists and other professional counselors. I am, however, suggesting that there is a connection between the impoverishment of friendship and our assumption that such professionals are the first and necessary recourse in our lives when we face difficulties.
13. Chris Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton call for a view of youth that does not segregate them or their issues from the larger life of congregations. "One of the biggest obstacles to our understanding teenagers' lives is the common apparent inability to see their lives within the larger, very powerful social and cultural context that forms it.... Adults typically frame adolescence in ways defining teenage life per se as itself a social problem and adolescents as alien creatures, strange and menacing beings, perhaps even monsters driven by raging hormones, visiting us from another planet. Teenagers—our own children—this theme suggests, are more dissimilar to us than they are like us, separated from the adult world by light years of distance and difference." To the contrary, Smith and Denton explain, "Most problems and issues that adults typically consider teenage problems are in fact inextricably linked to adult-world problems. Furthermore, most teens appreciate the relational ties they have to the adult world, and most of those who lack such ties wish they had more and stronger ties.... Adults need alternative mental and discursive models that emphasize grown-ups' similarities to, ties to, and common futures with youth." *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 264.