

The Importance of Proximity

Forty Days of Friendship, Week 3

John 4:1-42

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 19 March 2006

I want to start this morning with a question: Where do you go when you have a problem? Who do you turn to when you need some help or advice on an important issue? Or, to put the question another way, how do you feel when a complete stranger tries to talk to you about personal matters? Some time ago I was home alone, enjoying a moment of blissful solitude, when suddenly my privacy was interrupted by a knock at the door. Two people were standing there. Guess who they were? They said to me, "If you were to die tomorrow, do you know whether you would be going to heaven? Do you have peace in your heart?" Has that ever happened to you? Let me guess how you responded. You probably thought to yourself, "Wow, a chance to talk with some articulate and enthusiastic people about the most interesting and important topic in the world! Brilliant." No? Like me, you probably thought, "Why did I answer the door? I don't want to talk to strangers off the street about topics that are so complicated and personal, especially as they're probably trained to argue with everything I say." Now, think about this. If you, a Christian, who's committed to spreading the message of God's love and truth to others, feel that way when it comes to talking to strangers about spiritual matters, just think how your non-Christian friends must feel in these situations. If they're going to talk with anyone about issues of faith, it will be with people they know, people they trust, people they call their friends.

This week I spoke with a few people about how they came to faith. I asked them, "What was the key factor in *your* coming to faith?" In each case, do you know what they said? "A friend." This simply reflect the statistics.

Primary Factors in People Coming to Faith

Evangelistic crusade	0.5%
Special needs	1-2%
Visitation	1-2%
Walked into church	2-3%
Church programmes	2-3%
Sunday school contacts	4-5%
Pastor's contacts	5-6%
Influence of friend/relative	75-90%

According to the research, 75-90% of Christians attribute their conversion to the influence of a friend or a relative. So, if we're going to impact our world for Christ, reach those people who don't know Jesus, the most effective approach will be through friendships with those people. Getting close to those people. Last week we looked at a formula for reaching our friends with the message of God's love and truth, a formula based on Jesus' declaration that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world: **HP + CP + CC = MI**. Do you remember what the symbols stand for? High Potency plus Close Proximity plus Clear Communication equals Maximum Impact. If we are to impact those around us who don't know Jesus, it will mean not just a potent lifestyle that is marked by compassion, authenticity, and sacrifice, it will mean close proximity, getting close to those who need to hear the gospel clearly communicated.

The problem, of course, is that the longer you've been a Christian and enjoyed the benefits of Christian community, the more your network of friendships will be populated by Christians. The chances are if you're a Christian long enough, unless you intentionally do something about it, you won't eventually know any non-Christians closely enough to influence them. So the question we have to answer is how do you go about building genuine friendships with people who don't know God? And, even more importantly, once the friendship is in place how do you go about sharing your faith in a way that doesn't jeopardise the friendship? Let's take a look at Jesus. How did he go about doing this? If you read through Mark's gospel, of the fifty times that he says Jesus is with people, only six of those times is Jesus in a synagogue (the first century equivalent of church). Forty-four times – 88 percent of the time – Jesus is outdoors, in homes, at parties, building friendships with "sinners," people outside the religious establishment. Let's take a look at one of those occasions. It's found in John 4:1-42, and contains several powerful proximity principles.

1. Regard every passing contact as an opportunity for friendship (vv 1-6)

Here's the first one: regard every passing contact as an opportunity for friendship. Jesus is on a journey from Judea to Galilee. In the course of this journey he encounters a woman. A Samaritan woman. Now Jewish rabbis taught that a man should never talk to another woman in public. Certainly not a Samaritan woman. Given the bad blood that existed between the two races, Jews tended to avoid Samaritans. They wouldn't even use the same dishes that Samaritans used (v 9). And John says that this particular woman comes to draw water at "the sixth hour" (v 6) – in the middle of the day. Women usually came in groups to fetch water early in the morning

or later in the day when the sun was not so fierce. For this woman to come at midday on her own suggests that she is scorned by her community, a woman of questionable character. Any rabbi worth his salt would have ignored this woman. But Jesus sees here in this passing contact an opportunity to connect with one of God's lost children, an opportunity for friendship.

No matter how busy we are, how involved we are in Christian circles, all of us have to make frequent journeys to public places like supermarkets, cafes, hairdressers (some of us less frequently than others). Every time we do, we come into contact with people who don't yet know God. We can ignore them, or we can choose to show interest in them. With a little intentionality, these ordinary mundane journeys can become Spirit-directed, evangelistic adventures. Mark Mittelberg, who helped write the book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, tells about one time he was in a supermarket buying flowers for his wife. While he was there he struck up a conversation with an elderly woman and explained why he was buying the flowers. She said to him, "I remember when my husband used to buy me flowers. But that hasn't happened for a long time. He died years ago." They talked on for a while and she left. As Mark was checking out, all of a sudden, he had this idea. It was like God was nudging him to go and give her the flowers. So he did. She was overwhelmed. When he got home he told his wife, Heidi, what happened. (She wondered why the Holy Spirit didn't lead Mark to buy another bouquet for her. The line, "Honey, I bought some flowers for you, but God made me give them to another woman," only gets you so far.) But this elderly woman was so moved by that little gesture that she invited Mark to have tea with her. Ten years later, she contacted him again and told him how she still talks to people about what Mark did for her. Regard every passing contact as an opportunity for friendship. That's the first proximity principle.

2. Include others in your daily routine (vv 6-7)

Here's a second principle: Involve others in your everyday activities. If Jesus and his disciples started their journey at daybreak, they've probably been walking for about six hours. Jesus, John says, is "tired from the journey" (v 6). He decides to rest. He could have done that in solitude. But instead he does it in the company of this woman. We think that in order to build relationships with unchurched people we'll have to add a whole load of new activities to our already overburdened schedules. Not at all. An effective way to develop a friendship is to simply invite the person to join you in the things you're already planning to do. We all have to rest from time to time, right? If you're planning this week to watch one of the big events at the Commonwealth Games, why not invite the neighbours over to watch it with you? We all have to eat from time to time, right? Why not invite a workmate out for lunch? Why not this week get the neighbours over for an end of summer BBQ? You want to build a friendship with an unbeliever? Involve them in your everyday activities.

3. Use leading questions to activate conversations (vv 7-9)

But as someone said this week in the home group I attend, the real challenge, once you've formed a friendship, is to know how to start spiritual conversations without endangering the friendship. Do you ever struggle with that? Again, look at this passage. What's the first thing Jesus says in his encounter with the Samaritan woman? "Will you give me a drink?" (v 7). It's a simple question. And it presents another proximity principle. If you want to open a spiritual conversation in a relaxed, inoffensive way, use a question. It's not threatening. And if the question is about the other person, and what they believe, it communicates your interest in them. As we approach Easter, here's a few examples:

So, what are you going to do this Easter?
Are you planning to get along to church?
I'm curious; do you ever think about spiritual things?
If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, what do you think happened to his body?

Notice how the woman in this story replies to Jesus' question. She asks Jesus a question in return: "You're a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" Have you heard about "the reciprocal reflex"? It's a fancy term for describing the fact that asking someone a question often elicits a question in response. For example, have you ever noticed that when you ask someone, "What did you do in the weekend?" they answer you and then almost reflexively ask you the same question? "And what did *you* do in the weekend?" If you went to church in the weekend, or got involved in any kind of spiritual venture, the door is then wide open. A door that might lead to eternity. So ask questions.

4. Arouse curiosity with hints and suggestions (vv 10-11)

But in this story Jesus demonstrates one other brilliant way to turn a conversation towards spiritual matters. Arouse curiosity by dropping hints and suggestions. Jesus provokes the woman's interest by telling her that he can give her "living water" (v 10). On a literal level, living water means fresh, running water, as opposed to dead, stagnant water. In a dry land, where this kind of water was extremely valuable, Jesus immediately

catches her attention. But of course Jesus was referring to spiritual water, and the fact that he can satisfy our deepest spiritual desires. The woman is intrigued. "Where," she asks, "can you get this living water?" The point is that we don't to bring up our faith in a direct, almost confrontational fashion. Just create curiosity with some playful hints. I was chatting with a non-Christian friend this week. He was telling me about some of his friends who belong to different faiths. As he spoke I got the impression that he assumed all the world's religions – including Christianity – were essentially the same. I didn't say anything. I wish I had. If I could turn the clock back, this is what I would say: "If you've ever got time to talk about how Christianity is fundamentally different to every other religion in the world, just let me know. I'd love to run through it with you." And then leave it there. I would have opened the door for him to walk through if he's ready.

5. Don't underestimate their degree of interest (vv 27-42)

One last principle from this passage: Don't underestimate their degree of interest. Evangelistically, this woman was a most unlikely prospect. She's a Samaritan with very little theological knowledge. And not a good Samaritan either. It turns out she'd been through five husbands. When Jesus in v 18 gently raises this with her, she tries to evade him by suddenly switching topics. It seems like she is shut off to the truth. But it turns out (v 25) that she is waiting for a Messiah. And when Jesus identifies himself as the Messiah, she is so excited that she rushes back to town to tell everyone about Jesus, forgetting to take her water jar with her (vv 28-29). Despite appearances, she is spiritually thirsty. And when the Samaritans from the town come and hear Jesus, John says that "many" of them believed in him (v 41). That's why Jesus says in v 35: "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." Often people seem months, if not years, away from giving their lives to Christ. Don't be deceived.

Years ago there was an elderly lady that lived across the road from us. Her name was Nell. Mum used to send me over to her with plates of food or items of shopping. I used to get talking with her. It turned out that Nell had married twice but both husbands had died very young. So she had no children. No family. And no time for God. If there was one word that could describe her attitude towards God it was the word, "bitter." I used to talk with her about my faith in God. But she would say, "I can't believe in a God like that. I'd like to. But I can't." After a while her health deteriorated, and she ended up in a residential hospital. I remember visiting her one day. We talked again about God and his extraordinary love for each one of us. I said to Nell, "Do you want to know that love? Do you want to go to heaven?" She looked at me and said, "Yes, I do." So I explained the way to receive those gifts, and said, "Would you like to do that now?" She said, "Yes. I would." So there, at her bedside, I led this ninety-something year old woman in a prayer. A few weeks, or a few months later, she died. But she died a daughter of God, a follower of Jesus. Who would have thought?

I read this week about a survey that asked people who were ninety-five years or older what they'd do differently if they could live their lives over again. Do you know what their top three responses were? **They'd reflect more.** They would spend more time getting out of the daily grind in order to carefully examine the direction and meaning of their lives. **They'd risk more.** Given another chance, they'd be more courageous about stepping out of their comfort zones. And **they'd do more things that would outlast them when they die.** They'd invest in people, in friends. And there's no greater investment than to help a lost friend find their way to heaven. The returns are eternal (v 36). You'll be rejoicing together for all eternity. So here's our assignment for this week. Reflecting on what really matters in this life, would you take a risk? Would you this week make contact with a non-Christian friend. Invite them for dinner. Do something to get a little closer, to grow your friendship a little deeper, so that God could one day use you to bring them home.

Questions

1. What were the primary factors in your decision to commit your life to Christ?
2. How many close unbelieving friends do you have these days? Could you, like Jesus, be described as a "friend of sinners" (Matt 11:19)?
3. In Colossians 4:5 Paul says, "Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity." How could you apply these words this week?
4. How can you this week involve an unbelieving friend or neighbour in your everyday activities?
5. What tools have you found helpful in turning conversations towards issues of faith? How could you utilise the principles employed by Jesus in John 4?
6. A recent New Zealand poll found that eight out of ten young people believe in the supernatural. Do you think you tend to underestimate the level of spiritual interest in your unbelieving friends?
7. Brian McLaren says that when evaluating our success or failure in evangelism we should "count conversations, not conversions." What do you think he means. Do you agree?
8. Complete the *Impact List* and take one practical step this week to get closer to an unbelieving friend.