

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(January 19, 2020)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Building Faith at Home: Next Steps in the Digital Age**

#### **Healthy Relating in a Digital Age**

(selected verses from Proverbs)

##### **Introduction: A brave new world...**

A fish, being always immersed in water, won't be aware of or impressed with wetness. Its culture is all wet. To the fish, wetness is unremarkable.

And we, who are immersed in our own culture, will be unimpressed and even unaware of its uniquenesses.

Today, we're going to explore one aspect of 2020 culture that is truly unique. Not "kinda unique."

In at least this one way, our age is unique in human history and it uniquely impacts the all-important realm of how we go about building relationships.

I'm referring to the digital component of the age in which we live. And I can tell you - it hasn't always been like it is today.

From the dawn of history, relationships were built face-to-face. Communication was limited to conversing. Personal relationships were, by definition and of necessity, up-close-and-personal.

Then, of course, there was writing. Writing created the possibility of relationship-building via a different platform. And writing came along early.

There are examples of literate societies dating back to at least the Third Millennium, BC. So, people have been sitting down to write law codes, histories, lists, poems, and letters for thousands of years.<sup>1</sup>

But platforms beyond talking and writing to communicate and to build relationships have come only very recently.

The "five-thousand-year leap"<sup>2</sup> to the telegraph came in the 1830's. Alexander Graham Bell placed the first phone call in 1876.

Aside from improvements in the telephone, it was nearly a century later that communication took another evolutionary leap when computers allowed for the invention of electronic (e) mail (1960's) - and the leaps have just kept on coming.

Email was followed by texting which was followed by all forms of social media - Facebook and Twitter and dozens more.<sup>3</sup>

All these different platforms have brought enormous changes to our world, especially with respect to how relationships work.

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher, wrote in 1964, "*The medium is the message.*"<sup>4</sup>

By that phrase, McLuhan meant that the medium through which a message comes is as important as - maybe more important than - the content of the message itself.

McLuhan was right.

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, Johannes Gutenberg's invention (or perhaps, popularization) of the printing press (1440) was a giant leap forward, as it enabled wide scale publication of relatively inexpensive books and set the stage for the Protestant Reformation.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions including beating drums, sounding trumpets and sending smoke signals and carrier pigeons

<sup>3</sup> According to John Mark Comer in his excellent book, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, and others, the digital age of communication began in 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Found in McLuhan's book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.

I will interact with you in one way when we're face to face, another when I'm writing you a letter, and in yet another way when sending you a video.

All of these new platforms for relating are transformational and revolutionary. The digital world has changed relationship-building.

Now, some of the changes are wonderful.

*Positive changes wrought by the digital age...*

Obviously, there is something positive about being socially connected to others. And digital technology does make it easy to stay in touch with friends, family, and work, even if you are in another part of the world.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, these days you can...

- ...work at your "smart" home and learn online;
- ...store lots of data and retrieve it easily;
- ...edit documents and photos, and build stuff with 3D printing;
- ...use apps that map the world to help you get home;
- ...enjoy lots of entertainment and news;
- ...shop and bank online (mostly) securely -  
- and all of this on increasingly smaller-sized devices.

The potential impact for good of some of these communication advances has led some Christians leaders whom I greatly respect to tell pastors like me that if we're not on Twitter...we should confess, repent, and sign up. (To this point, I've resisted.)

*"Concerns" wrought by the digital age...*

There are lots of positives to digital advanced. But, as we all know, these revolutionary technological advancements have brought with them a few downsides.

---

<sup>5</sup> And it's fast. Internet speeds have increased exponentially since the early days of dial-up. You can transfer lots of information - in text, audio, or video formats - across the web almost instantaneously.

Nicholas Carr writes in his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, "*What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation.*"

Like Carr, many people blame the digital world for making us dumber and dumber, with shorter and shorter attention spans.

They tells us that human attention span is decreasing with each passing year. Back in 2000 it was tagged at twelve seconds. More recently, it was measured at eight seconds.

That's bad news. The worse news is that the attention span of a goldfish is nine seconds. So, yes, we are losing to goldfish.

Tristan Harris, who formerly worked for Google as a "product philosopher" (I didn't know that was a thing), left Google to start a non-profit. He wanted to urge software designers to sign off on a Hippocratic (first, do no harm), because, according to Harris, every program written is designed to distract and to addict.

And, of course, downside risks also include bullying on social media, degrading sexual content, fake news, and lots of wasted time.

In listing these negatives, I'm not issuing a call to return to the good ol' days before Wi-fi. I'm really not a Luddite who believes that technology is bad.<sup>6</sup>

But it is clear to me that the possibilities created by the digital world are not just neutral.<sup>7</sup> We'll either open our eyes to the positives and the negatives and choose the good, or tech will be used for bad.

We each need to learn to discern how each up-and-coming new digital platform should be used, especially as each one relates to how we communicate with each other and how we build relationships.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The Luddites were a secret organization of English textile workers in the 19th century, a radical faction of which destroyed textile machinery as a form of protest against machinery that was replacing workers.

<sup>7</sup> David Kinnaman, in *Faith for Exiles*, repeatedly uses the term "Digital Babylon" to highlight the dangers of screens.

THAT - how we relate to each other - is the arena in which the digital age can impact us the most powerfully, for good or for ill.

My burden today is to have us all sit down to a meal to address the issue of healthy relating in a digital age.

The table having been set, we'll now turn our attention to an old Book.

The Bible was written three thousand years before any platform we've been talking about was conceived of, yet the Bible speaks with freshness to teach relationship-building skills tailor-made for 2020.

*The Bible and relationship-building...*

The Bible is best viewed through the lens of relationship-building. It's all about relationship between God and us and between us and us. Start to finish.

The Bible shows us all kinds of relationships. They are healthy or not, surfacy or intimate, formal or casual, friendly or hostile.

You'll find relationships between men and women, adults and children, peer-to-peer, masters and slaves all over the Bible.

By the content, flow, and themes of the Bible, God is telling us that relationship-building is central to what we are to be all about.

Again, you and I live in an age in which relationship-building can take place on any one of a number of different platforms.

But, for both the biblical writers and for the original readers of the Bible, there was one platform for relationship-building. It was basic. It was face-to-face.<sup>9</sup>

Today, we have access to a dizzying array of options when it comes to platforms for building a relationship. But **certain rules apply** for healthy, mutually satisfying, God-honoring relationships, regardless of the platform.

For the next few minutes, we'll explore some of these timeless rules-for-relating, as found in the Bible.

My aim is to paint a mouth-wateringly beautiful picture of *you* navigating personal relationships on all the platforms available to you in 2020 with truth and grace.

The Bible book I'm going to use to paint that picture is the Old Testament book of Proverbs.<sup>10</sup> I'm using all the verses from Proverbs I could find that include the word "*friend*."<sup>11</sup>

The initial brushstrokes of this painting are warnings.

### **Healthy Relationships: Non-Starters**

#### **The Best Friends Money Can Buy (19:6)**

***[19:6] Many will entreat the favor of a generous man, And every man is a friend to him who gives gifts.***<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Writing was possible for a small fraction of ancient societies.

<sup>10</sup> We Westerners may think of wisdom as the task of untangling tangled philosophical knots. That is not what the Bible means by the word. As the word is used in Proverbs, wisdom is extremely practical and down to earth. We could use the term "skill in living" or "common sense under the fear of God."

<sup>11</sup> Jesus forever elevated the whole idea of friendship when He referred to us, His followers, as His "*friends*." (John 15:15) Friendship is of transcendent value.

<sup>12</sup> Also ***[19:4] Wealth adds many friends But a poor man is separated from his friend.***

---

<sup>8</sup> Neil Postman, from his book, Technopoly, quoted in The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry (John Mark Comer, p. 41), "Technology must never be accepted as part of the natural order of things...Every technology - from an IQ test to a car to a TV set to a computer - is a product of a particular economic and political context and carries with it a program, an agenda, and a philosophy that may or may not be life-enhancing and that therefore requires scrutiny, criticism, and control."

King Solomon says that when interacting with someone, we should be on guard if we have something (money, popularity, time, or power) the other person wants, because the people who flock to you may be out to fleece you.

No doubt Solomon knew all about this, first-hand. A king's entourage will consist of some people who surround him just because of his fame and fortune.

It's the same thing in our own world.

If you're a politician on the rise, or a star athlete, you've got friends.<sup>13</sup> Lose an election or lose a step on the field and see who remains by your side.

Those who leave are fake friends. And there are at least two other kinds of fake friends to avoid like the plague.

### **Friends with an Agenda (27:6)**

***[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,  
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.***

This "friend" greets you like you expect a friend to greet you. Warmly. With a kiss, an embrace, a firm handshake.

But the external warmth hides a cold agenda. He is out to take you in to get out of you what he wants from you.

God gave us things to use and people to treasure. Fake friends treasure things and use people.

Most of us with a bit of grey have had some experience with this fake friend. And many who aren't yet grey have learned that all that glitters, friendship-wise, isn't gold. So, some here don't need Solomon's warnings.

But if you are young or if you haven't been faked into a friendship, listen to Solomon.

Beware. Be wise. Be on the lookout for people who would take advantage of you. And, third, don't overvalue acquaintances.

### **Friends vs. Acquaintances (18:24)**

***[18:24] A man of too many friends comes to ruin,  
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.***

This is a two-edged warning.

On one edge is a danger of intentionally multiplying surface-deep friendships and on the other edge is the danger of not nurturing deep friendships.

Superficial friends come and go. What we need is that "***closer than a brother***" friend who stays.

It is tempting to hold people at arm's length. It is dangerous to let someone into our confidence. Intimacy is scary.

It is easier to establish acquaintance-level relationships with dozens (or hundreds or thousands) of people than it is to do the hard work of forging a few, meaty friendships.

But, surface doesn't work well over the long haul, and it isn't what we need when the chips are down.

If we're looking to build relationships that count, we'll avoid friends who can be bought, friends who would take advantage, and friendships that only touch the surface.

Instead, imagine the beauty of building a circle of friendships - on any platform! - populated by people who are for you, people who are genuine, people with whom you are going deep.

---

<sup>13</sup> One of rock music's early stars, Janis Joplin, after a concert only months before her suicide, "*I have just made love to 25,000 people, and I am going home alone.*"

So, we're aware of the dangers of fake friends. We need the genuine article. In Proverbs, Solomon describes three blocks that will help us build that genuine article.

You've heard the saying, "*He's a good man in a storm*"?

That means he's the one, she's the one, you want around when life's storms hit. You want a foul-weather friend.

### **Healthy Relationship: Building Blocks**

#### **Friends Give the Gift of PRESENCE (17:17)**

***[17:17] A friend loves at all times,  
And a brother is born for adversity.***

This is a brother-friend, a sister-friend.<sup>14</sup>

- These are the ones you want standing next to you at the graveside when a loved one has died.
- They will be with you in the hospital.
- They will help you pick up the pieces of your life after a business failure or after a moral blowout.

When it seems that all the world is against you, the friend "***who sticks closer than a brother***" is right beside you. He's *present*.

The second building block of the friendship we need is *honesty*.

#### **Friends are (sometimes brutally) HONEST (27:6)**

***[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,  
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.***

Every day, at hospitals all over San Antonio, surgeons take knives and slice open the bodies of their patients.

---

<sup>14</sup> Solomon is of a mind that there is no better picture of a deep relationship than that which should exist between brothers. That is why David, Solomon's father, referred to Jonathan, his closest friend, as his "***brother***" in 2 Samuel 1:26.

They spill blood on purpose. The cuts they make will cause pain and they're OK with that. To promote overall health, they hack away.

The friend you need is the one who is willing to be a soul surgeon. You won't hear empty flattery from a friend. You will get unvarnished truth.

Your friend will tear into you, and it's good when he does. His wounds are better than any insincere embrace. Your friend loves you so much that she's willing to risk rejection by telling you the hard truth.

There are some of you here who have told me what I have *needed* to hear rather than what I would have *liked* to hear. For that, I am forever in your debt.

You've pulled me aside when I've spoken rashly. You've asked me about my decisions (as in, "*Really Dave?*"). You've asked me to defend my positions on theology.

I'm a better man for having had friends who are willing to speak the truth in love. You, too, want a friend or two or three in your life like that.

Friends give the gifts of powerful presence and loving honesty. They give another gift, too. Solomon mentions it and we'll consider it.

#### **Friends Provide Loving and Wise COUNSEL (27:9)**

***[27:9] Oil and perfume make the heart glad,  
So a man's counsel is sweet to his friend.***

Of course, I am grateful for the fine professional counselors I know. Counselors are key players in the world of mental health in our society.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> A century and a half ago, the western world witnessed the birth of professional counseling. In recent decades, there has also developed a whole branch of counseling that is solidly Christ-centered and Scriptural. I praise God for that development. We all applaud the efforts of men and women who work hard to wisely apply Scripture's truths to serious personal issues.

But, Solomon wrote in an age without vocational counselors. He is writing of the therapeutic effect of a friend in the life of a friend.<sup>16</sup>

A friend's sincere encouragement, exhortation, rebuke, advice lingers long after the conversation ends because we know that our friend has told us what she has told us because she loves us. She cares.

Imagine being that kind of a friend.

Picture yourself being the one who initiates talk about other than weather/kids/shopping/work/Spurs stuff. You're the one who asks open-ended questions. You probe and pry and snoop and open Pandora's Box.

You approach your friend with questions or with observations that expose and explore. You're not afraid to uncover a raw nerve.

You approach your friend, and speak: *"I was so sad to hear the news about your last check-up / your child's recent choice / the loss of your job. Tell me. How is your walk with God in light of your pain?"*

Talk like that is the work of the counselor-friend.

Such work is scary, sure. But if you - you, who loves your friend - won't ask these questions, if you, the friend, won't *go there*, who will?

***"...a man's counsel is sweet to his friend."***

Of course, if something comes up in your deep-water conversation that you don't know what to do with, there are skilled counselors to whom you can turn. Call us up here at church and we'll connect you and your friend to one.

But don't let fear keep you from *counseling* (encouraging, praying for, talking with) your friend through the valley of the shadow of death.

Our picture of relationship-building is coming into sharper focus. There is growing connection as the gifts of presence, honesty, and counsel flow back and forth.

You're hungry for these friendships and you value the idea of having them. They're worth their weight in gold. And, like gold, there is a cost involved in enjoying them.

The first cost of friendship may sound funny, but it's true. Friendship requires space.

### **Healthy Relationships: Costs**

#### **Friendship Costs SPACE (25:17)**

***[25:17] Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's (or friend's) house, Or he will become weary of you and hate you.***

Sure, we shouldn't go over to our friend's place too often or stay too long. But Solomon's doing more than handing out style pointers on visiting protocols. The real point here is that friendship must be held with a loose hand.

Friendships are the gift of God. The "friend" who demands time and attention is treating friendship as if it was an inalienable right.

Genuine friendship is a precious and a fragile thing. Lots of friendships have been ruined by demandingness, or by one friend putting the other in a position of obligation. Give space.

And here's another cost we'll be willing to pay to have a genuine friendship. Sensitivity.

#### **Friendship Costs SENSITIVITY (27:14)**

***[27:14] He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning, It will be reckoned a curse to him.***

<sup>16</sup> There are lots of studies that bear out that "lay counselors" and "peer counselors" often do a better, more credible job of counseling than the paid professionals.

Solomon wants us to picture a “morning person” hollering happily to a “non-morning person.”

I can assure you that it just isn’t smart or loving to ignore the wisdom of this verse. But the application of the verse goes well beyond how to give early morning greetings.

It has to do with being sensitive to the needs of the person you are with. Specifically, we are to choose expressions that will best meet the need of our friend in the moment.

If, because of an experience your friend has just had, the expression that best meets his need is calm and tranquility, you will tailor your expression to meet that need - even though you are ecstatic about something that’s occurred in your own life.

If your friend has just received wonderful news and greets you with that news, then even though you may be in turmoil about some issue you’re facing, your commitment to bless your friend will override your own angst and you’ll rejoice with them.

As the Apostle Paul instructs, you’ll rejoice with those who rejoice and will weep with those who weep (see Romans 12).

If your friend has suffered a devastating loss, silence will be golden.

Remember the Old Testament story of Job. Job’s three friends came to comfort him in his intense pain after his many losses. For seven days they were wonderful, effective, silent comforters.

Then, they started talking and everything went south.

To build a strong relationship, you will sensitively tailor your words and even the expression of your emotions to your friend’s need.

And we’ll end with a tough one. I thought about skipping this one, but I couldn’t. It’s too important to omit.

## Friendship Costs SINCERITY (26:18, 19)

**[26:18] Like a madman who throws  
Firebrands, arrows, and death,  
[19] So is the man who deceives his neighbor (or friend)  
And says, “Was I not joking?”**

Sarcasm can be fun. But how many times has joking around wounded a friend and killed a friendship?

Cutting and “funny” remarks about a person’s looks, their lacks, or their luck wound deeply. And the wounds don’t go away when we say, “I was just kidding!”

### Conclusion:

Every one of these wisdom-based relationship-builders we’ve just seen from Proverbs was to be put in place by people who lived before Twitter, email and the printing press.

It was all to be applied in a non-digital age where everything was face-to-face.

So, just imagine, you, building relationships in which these conditions prevailed today.

- You are avoiding the relationships against which you have been warned: bought friends, agenda-driven friends, multiplying acquaintances.
- You are building friendships marked by presence, honesty, counsel.
- You’re paying the price of space, sensitivity, sincerity.

But today, in addition to face-to-face, you have lots of other platforms for relationship-building and communication.

You’ve got phone calls, emails, texts, videos, tweets, and social media outlets galore. (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat, Tumblr, TikTok, Reddit, Viber, Snapchat, Pinterest, Telegram, and Medium, to name only a few)

So...

- ...let's strive to apply all the Bible's wisdom as we build relationships, regardless of the platform we're using.

I'm not going to issue any "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not" about what communication platforms to use. None of them - at least none of them that I've looked into - are necessarily destructive.

My hope for today is that all of us will bring all of Solomon's wisdom to bear on all of our relationship-building communications, regardless of platform.

After all, **the same rules apply across the board** for beautiful relating.

- ...let's give thanks for the benefits of technological advances while being aware of their limitations and liabilities.

We live in an unprecedented day, filled with some benefits that no other generation has had - a lot of that because of technological advances. Let's be grateful and use that technology in ways that glorify God and that benefit people.

And let's be realistic enough to beware of the dangers of this brave new world.

\*\*\*Social Media isn't bad, but it is at least interesting that Sean Parker, the founder of Napster and the first president of Facebook, has become a "conscientious objector" to social media.

\*\*\*And it's hard to dismiss concerns about the addictive power of screens when we learn that the average iPhone user touches his or her phone 2,617 times a day.

\*\*\*It's worth asking what obstacles to relationship-building have to be overcome when I can't see your face? Your reactions?

It's only wise to use every tool - circular saw or cell phone - with caution.

In conclusion, let me just say that all who preach reach for more than we grasp. Some more than others. I more than most.

When I bring a message to you, I'm always convinced of the truth of the Scriptures and am usually pretty settled that what I'm saying reflects that truth. That's the case with what I've said today.

But I'll also be the first to admit that while I think everything I've said today is true, I have not always lived out what Solomon says about the wisdom of friendships as I wish I had.

One of the things that happens in a church where the pastor hangs around for a long time (as I have) is that lots of people in the church end up knowing the pastor pretty well.

A lot of you know my strengths and weaknesses. You know my faults and foibles and have seen me fail. You know that I'm far from perfect when it comes to relationships and communication.

One night this past week I spent a few minutes simply reflecting on some of the relational blunders I have made recently and was appalled. I have so far to go.

Maybe you're realizing that you, too, have a long way to go in learning wise relationship building skills.

Well, friends, here's a very hopeful proverb for all of us who have yet to "arrive."

***[Proverbs 24:16] For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, But the wicked stumble in time of calamity.***

God gives us a lifetime of opportunities to stumble, get up by His grace, and walk again. I look forward to walking the path of friendship, even with stumbles along the way, with you.