



Related articles:

"A very rare treasure, indeed"
(page 28)

Living Lutheran,
January 2020

Reprints:

Permission is granted for individuals, small groups and congregations to reproduce this study guide for local use.

Tell us:

Do you find this guide helpful? Send comments and suggestions to rcblezard@embarqmail.com

Study guide

"A very rare treasure, indeed"

Friendships deepen faith and life

By Robert C. Blezard

Where would we be without friends? Where would *you* be without them? Through our deep personal connections we grow as people and experience the love of God. What's been your experience?

Exercise 1: Your friendships

As a study group, share stories of friendship and love. Here are some prompts to help get the discussion started:

- Who was your best friend growing up? What made this friend the "best"?
- When have you been a true friend to someone?
- How or why is a friendship different from a family relationship?
- What's the funniest thing you ever did with a friend?
- Who is your best friend now? What makes this friend the "best"?
- When has someone been a true friend to you?
- What's the most daring thing you've ever done with a friend?
- How have friendships helped you grow in faith?
- Describe a "friendship" with a beloved pet. How is it different from human friendships?
- What have you done with a friend that got you (or might have gotten you) in trouble?

Exercise 2: The Bible on friendships

Consider each of the following quotes from Scripture and discuss:

- What is the teaching about friendship?
- What's true about it?
- When or how have you experienced it?
- What can we learn from this teaching?

Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin (Proverbs 18:24).

The righteous gives good advice to friends, but the way of the wicked leads astray (Proverbs 12:26).

A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity (Proverbs 17:17).



About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).



Contact us:

LivingLutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

Living Lutheran is the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide: "A very rare treasure, indeed" *continued*

Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads, or you may learn their ways and entangle yourself in a snare (Proverbs 22:24, 25).

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

[Jesus taught] "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12, 13).

Exercise 3: Spiritual friendships

In his brilliant book *Real Faith for Real Life: Living the Six Marks of Discipleship* (Augsburg Fortress, 2004), Michael Foss, a Lutheran pastor, describes the importance of nourishing spiritual relationships. It's one of the six marks of discipleship. He wrote:

"Friendship is a spiritual trust from God. Close friendships are relationships within which we can learn of God's kind of loyalty. ...

"Our close friendships built on a foundation of faith offer a glimpse of the eternal love of our heavenly Father. Such friendship grows deeper over time. ...

"Friendship has the remarkable possibility of growing our souls. The human spirit shrinks in isolation. I think that is why God made us for friendships with one another."

Discuss:

- How is friendship a spiritual trust from God? How have you experienced this?
- How is it that we learn "God's kind of loyalty" from close friendships? Share a time when you have experienced this kind of loyalty.
- How do our friendships offer "a glimpse of the eternal love of our heavenly father"? Share about a time when you have experienced this.
- Why and how does friendship have "the remarkable possibility of growing our souls"? How has this been true in your life?
- Foss wrote, "The human spirit shrinks in isolation." In what ways is this true? How have you seen or experienced it?
- Why is nourishing spiritual relationships truly "a mark of discipleship"?

"A very rare treasure, indeed"

Friendships deepen faith and life

By Robert C. Blezard

Her mother having passed away only days earlier, Carolyn Bolz was in deep grief while attending the Sunday service at Trinity Lutheran Church, Riverside, Calif. While others cheerfully passed the peace, she hung her head and wept.

"Suddenly there was a hand on my shoulder," Bolz recalled. She looked up and saw a church member she didn't know very well. Jackie Letourneau Wagner handed her some tissues, joined her in the pew and listened empathetically. The encounter led to a joyful friendship.

"Thanks to her unexpected act of kindness on that Sunday morning, I felt the love of Jesus and made a new friend," Bolz said.

Bolz was one of many who responded to *Living Lutheran's* call for readers to share stories of friendship and faith. Friends occupy a special place in our lives. Through them, as for Bolz, we often experience God's love, especially in times of deep need.

That was the case for Cynthia Lauletta, a member of Grace Lutheran Church, Mount Prospect, Ill., when she went through an especially difficult period of one misfortune after another. She lost her father to a heart attack and then two beloved pets died. She also faced declining health, car trouble and the betrayal of people she trusted.

"It was almost too much to bear," Lauletta said. In her pain she seemed to forget her faith. But church friends surrounded her with support and love, accompanying her back to wholeness. "The power of God still amazes me," she said. "If I should 'forget' his strength, I have strong, spiritual people in my life to guide me back."

Friends not only give us love and support in times of trouble, they can help us find a stronger faith

when ours is wavering. While a student at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., during the 1970s, Larry Gajderowicz found himself plagued with doubts about his faith. That's when he met a new friend who shared common interests in school, sports and family, but especially in faith. It dominated their late-night talks.

"He bared his soul to me and I bared mine to him," Gajderowicz said, who grew in faith and wound up joining his friend's congregation, St. Mark Lutheran, Evansville, Ind., where he now serves as a certified lay worship leader. The friendship that led him back to faith has deepened over the decades. "The only thing that has grown more than my friendship with this wonderful friend is my everyday walk with Christ," he said.

Discerning what's truly important

Church is a great place to develop faith and friendships, but so are Lutheran camps, said Kaitlyn Rager, a member of Zion Lutheran Church, Hummelstown, Pa. "Camp is my happy place, my favorite place and my home," she said.

As someone who has experienced depression, Rager knows that it's sometimes difficult to feel God's





presence. But she always finds comfort in reaching out to camp friends.

“Even in my darkest moments, when I feel everything falling down around me, I read my affirmations from leadership training camp, I look at goofy pictures of my friends and I at confirmation camp, and I text my friends ... my friends that I gained through the work of God bringing us together to enrich our faith,” Rager said.

Thinking about long-lasting friendships, Linda Staats, a member of Faith Lutheran Church, Phoenix, recalls *The Message* translation of Proverbs 18:24: “Friends come and friends go, but a true friend sticks by you like family.” She finds that to be true for a lifelong group of seven girls who grew up in the same small town in Iowa. Now scattered across five states, they stay in touch by email, text and videoconferencing, and gather once a year.

“Faithful, lifelong friends—a very rare treasure, indeed!” Staats said.

Sometimes friends can help us discern what is really important, said Sue Czarnetsky, who was once in the middle of a hectic day when a friend asked if she could visit. Czarnetsky felt torn.

“I watched the struggle between the Martha and Mary sides of my personality,” said Czarnetsky, a member of St. Mark Lutheran Church, Springfield,

Va. Although she was very busy, her Mary side prevailed, and she invited the friend over.

The incident reminded her of how Jesus asked the disciples to journey with him in faith. “Beginning my journey that day required me to slow down,” Czarnetsky said. “By slowing down, I was able to hear the Spirit speak and to clearly see my way.”

Deep friendship even transcends species for Pat Gergar, a member of Grace Lutheran Church, Macungie, Pa. Pointing out that “God” spelled backward is “dog,” he counts his two dogs among his best friends. After all, dogs provide people with companionship, listen to our stories, keep our secrets and provide us with unconditional love that mirrors God’s love for us. And when we lose pets, they teach us about love and coping with death.

“Just like Jesus walked this earth as God’s Son, I am convinced that God put dogs on this earth for us to have a physical connection with the unconditional love only our Lord can provide,” Gergar said. **L**

Download a study guide at **livinglutheran.org** by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



Robert C. Blezard is an assistant to the bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod and editor of *Living Lutheran’s* study guides.