

Siloam

It's official: going to church makes you happy. Well, actually, it's not going to church that makes you happy – it's the friends you have at church that make the difference. A study published in the December issue of the *American Sociological Review* shows that religion's "secret ingredient" for happiness is based on friendships built in religious congregations. In their study *Religion, Social Networks and Life Satisfaction*, Chaeyoon Lim and co-author Robert D. Putnam looked at the link between religiosity and happiness. Surprisingly, it wasn't faith or prayer that made people feel better about themselves. Rather, it was the social aspects of religion that led to greater satisfaction. Lim says, "The evidence substantiates that it is not really going to church and listening to sermons or praying that makes people happier, but making church-based friends and building intimate social networks there." Lim and Putnam based their work on the Faith Matters Study, a survey of U.S. adults conducted in 2006 and 2007. According to Faith Matters, regular attendance at church did not make people any happier than those who never went to church – but having friends at church did. People who attended church infrequently, but had friends in the congregation were happier than those who attended regularly but had no friends, and the happiest people by far were those who attended church regularly and had friends in the congregation.

A sense of belonging is one of the basic human needs. To know that one is included in a family, a circle of friends, a working group or a faith community is essential for the person to develop his or her self-worth and self-esteem. Notice that Jesus called his disciples to live as a community; they shared meals together, traveled together and stayed in the same place together, sharing celebrations and concerns together. Every disciple counted himself as a friend of Jesus; Jesus did all he could to encourage them to be friends with each other, as well. Jesus knew the importance of a friendship that could hold them together in every circumstance; he sent the disciples out in pairs to spread the gospel, and promised to be there among

them where two or three are gathered in his name. I think the disciples had a strong friendship with one another, strong enough to grow even when their leader was no longer physically with them. That is something to emulate: we are all called by Christ individually, to work together for His kingdom.

I used to volunteer at First United Church in the Downtown Eastside Vancouver. The church opens their door seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day, providing meals and many other services for the homeless. The church office is like the post office in Ladysmith; many people list the church address as their own, and they each have their own post office box for mail. The church is home not only for the homeless but also for the volunteers, the staff and the neighbours who regularly visit. Every Wednesday evening, there is a community gathering, where people share not only good food, but also their life, stories and gifts. Whenever I went to the Wednesday gathering, I found a new spirit of community; people who have finally found a sense of belonging; not just food or shelter alone but a place of friendship where they can celebrate their life together even in times of trouble.

In today's story, we see a person who deserves a big celebration because he was blind but now he sees. But, surprisingly and sadly, no one is there for him to celebrate the recovery of his sight. The first surprise is the community's reaction; they do not recognize the man who was born blind. This is so odd. The man has lived in their midst all his life; his neighbours have interacted with him, perhaps helped him cross the street or draw water. Why do they fail to recognize him after he is healed? Is it because the only marker of his identity was his blindness? Has the fact that he was differently abled been the only thing they could ever see in him?

A second issue surrounds the actions of the religious community. The Pharisees do not want to hear or believe the man's story, because it opposes the story they want to tell. They count Jesus as a sinner, not a hero, because he made mud, work that is prohibited on the Sabbath. Even the man's family backs away from him, and his parents put their own safety before his welfare. Maybe we can understand an older couple being

reluctant to sacrifice their home, work and community for their son, but how could we not expect them to celebrate with him, to be joyful over his healing? There is nothing of that in this text. The parents' fear overwhelms their joy, and they abandon their son to the authorities.

The community fails. The religious authorities fail. The family fails. The only trustworthy figures in this story are the man born blind and Jesus. The man tells the truth, even in the face of threats, the abandonment of his community and family. Again and again, the man witnesses to the saving grace he has experienced in Jesus Christ. We don't know how many friends the man had before Jesus healed him; we cannot say what his experience was at temple, whether his friends regularly saved a seat for him, spoke with him, ate with him. We do know that, at that moment, Jesus is the only one the man can trust, and he is the only one we can trust in this story. Although the Pharisees lay claim to dispensing grace, it is Jesus who transforms. It is Jesus who heals. It is Jesus who stands with the man in his final isolation – and that brings us back to the beginning, the idea that people with friends in church are happier than those without.

I think maybe the idea is that friends in church are more than just friends you might find anywhere – these are people who have chosen to worship Christ, to come together as a community of support and comfort. We have fun together, but we also build strength together, and I would like to believe that we would all choose to stand up for each other in every difficulty – but sometimes the human heart has failings. Sometimes we step back when we should be stepping forward, we pull away when we should be reaching out; even with our friends, our loved ones, - we are, after all, only human. But Jesus will always stand for us, will always be our conscience and our advocate. Our friend, who sends each of us to the pool of Siloam to wash away the mud and see truly the world around us.