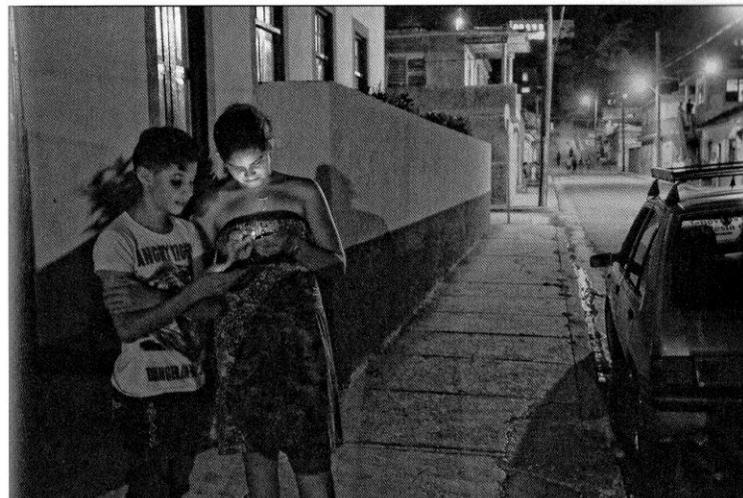


As a single 27-year-old I'm in a stage of life where most of my friends are getting married and having children. Our Facebook feeds bursting with funny new-adult mishaps have been replaced by scores of engagement, wedding, and baby pictures.

It's great fun watching my peers step into the next chapters of their lives. Every meal they share with their young families, every outing, gift, and joint purchase, is a milestone worth documenting. Though marriage and parenthood aren't on my agenda, seeing their happiness in person and online adds to my own happiness.

But as much as I cherish them, the trouble with my newlywed and new-parent friends is that every little thing—from the orange eaten for lunch to internet connection trouble mentioned in office chitchat—somehow circles back to their spouse and/or children. If you want a fun game, slip the most obscure things you can think of into conversations with new couples or parents and count how many milliseconds it takes for them to relate each thing back to their household. The connections they make to get there are gymnastic. While I enjoy a funny baby story as much as the next person, this obsession with the nuclear family seems to blind people to the joys of other equally God-honoring relationships.

Case in point: recently the "Love Your Spouse" Facebook challenge went viral. It's been especially popular among the church crowd. Every day for a week, you're invited to post a different picture of yourself with your significant other in acknowledgement of how much you love them—bonus points for sharing specific attributes that make your heart pitter-patter—then challenge another friend to do the same for their partner. There are many similar challenges for dating couples, parents, and siblings, but rarely anything as thoughtful for friends. Odd? I thought so, too.



Church culture focuses heavily on the family unit, but scripture is chockablock with history-shaping friendships: Paul and Barnabas, David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Jesus and Peter, just to name a few. So why is friendship taken for granted? I suspect the answer is a complex one, but that hasn't stopped me from diving right in anyway by starting a new social media trend that I titled the "Celebrate Friendship" challenge. Armed with nothing but conviction and a Facebook password, I took to the interwebs and posted:

"How often do we tell non-family/non-romantic loved ones how special they are to us? Time for a fresh challenge! Celebrate friendship by posting a photo and/or memory of a friend each day for a week. This could be the same person or a different one each day. Don't forget to tag others in the challenge to share the love!"

Over the next seven days I posted humorous pictures with friends whom I rarely tell how much they mean to me. As more people accepted the challenge, my Facebook feed started filling up with thanks for unforgettable memories and examples from my friends of how friendships shaped their faith. People learned new things about how they'd positively influenced those around them. Friends of friends found encouragement in the stories of people they didn't even know. Everyone was celebrating each other's friendships, laughing together, and reconnecting. For several weeks Facebook felt like a big party.

Wouldn't it be great if that same sense of celebration for different types of love permeated our sanctuaries, ministries, and conversations? How much more welcoming and attractive might the Body of Christ be if we openly appreciated each person's value regardless of their marital or procreative status? The family unit is essential, but love is a fantastically diverse actuality. God invites us to rejoice in and multiply the gift of love not only within our families, but with *everyone* around us, as well. So next time you find yourself in the internet neighborhood, maybe reconnect with your college roommate or post a picture with that friend who listens to all those stories about your spouse and kids. Friendship deserves its own spotlight.



A mosaic of Friendly living

Poem: Awakened in the Word

By Franchot Ballinger

