

TV with friends

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [August 6, 2014](#) issue



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Again and again in scripture, God's people recite the story of God's work among them. This recitation is an act of communal self-definition. As the people tell the story of God they also tell the story of themselves, and they become a people through the telling of it. These days most of the stories that we share as a culture come from television, film, and novels.

While the stories in popular culture do not compare with scripture, they are nevertheless important: as shared stories they create community. Preachers know this and refer to them in sermon illustrations. The televised stories create a culture with stories in common, but even more powerfully, the stories gather smaller, close-knit communities of watchers.

When I was in elementary school my family had a date each week to watch *The Cosby Show*. We shared laughs, and I was allowed to stay up past my bedtime. The

Huxtable kids' growing-up years were intertwined with my own; their relationship with their parents became intertwined with my relationship with mine. When I recall the Huxtables, I remember being a child.

In college I gathered with friends to watch *Friends* and *ER*—in fact, I did this more faithfully than I did anything else in college. As our coed cohort kept up with the saga between characters Ross and Rachel, we were enacting our own relationship drama as a group of late adolescents relating to each other during formative years. When I think about *Friends* I can feel the carpet I sprawled on, smell the pizza we ate, and recall each of the people around me.

In my graduate school years my husband and I met with friends to watch *The West Wing*. We took turns meeting in each other's apartments and cooking supper. Many of us were deeply immersed in vocational discernment. The idealism we felt about President Bartlet was tied up with that stage of life, and we shared our personal struggles along with comments about the White House plots and characters.

My husband and I have a current standing TV date with another couple for HBO's *Game of Thrones*. After we put the kids to bed, we share a meal and conversation about marriage and work. When we talk about the show itself, we tend to nerdy venting: how the war of the seven kingdoms coheres with British history or the pros and cons of the story lines unfolding in both television and novel forms. Maybe we're settled enough in real life to crave escapism. Maybe there's something in the show's power struggles that speaks to the less bloody dramas of the ordinary. In any case, we wouldn't dream of watching this drama without one another.

In many ways these communities of shared stories shaped the stories I tell about my life, from personal history to parenting to vocation. When the shared story crops up in my life, so do the people with whom I watched the TV shows. When my daughter catches an old *Cosby* episode and is fascinated because Cliff and Clair won't let Vanessa wear makeup, my daughter and I talk, and our conversations connect me back to my own parents. Because I watched Vanessa when I was a child, I'm able to identify with my child as she watches her. When the college students I teach comment that they're binge-watching the now-antiquated *Friends*, I'm able to empathize with them as I remember the time when I stood where they stand.

Admittedly, the stories in *Friends* or *The Cosby Show* aren't important on a cosmic scale. But these smaller stories can teach us about faithfulness, community, and empathy. For better or for worse—and I think for better—my life has been shaped by

these communities of watchers. These television shows have formed the context for deep friendships, valuable interaction, and important discernment. A shared story is a powerful tool for connection.