

Virtuous friendship

Prudence and constancy might not sound like much fun, but they create the load-bearing relationships communities need to flourish.

by [Rachel Mann](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue



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What role does friendship play in a flourishing community? I ask this as a person who was raised to believe that, as the title of a Kacey Musgraves song has it, family is family—that it is the primary set of relationships that won't let you down. Even if this simply reveals the extent to which I grew up in the UK equivalent of the boondocks, I still hold a hunch that family units (in their wonderfully rich varieties) trump friendships.

Yet friendship is one of the fundamentals of divine love commended by Christ himself. On the night before his death, as he prepares for betrayal, he gives to his closest disciples a new commandment: that they love one another as he has loved them. Tellingly, Jesus unpacks this commandment not through ideas of family or work or power obligations, but through friendship: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:12-15).

As Christ faces death, he prioritizes friendship; he resets the relationship between God and humanity from master/servant to friend among friends. Christ singles out friendship and challenges us to interrogate what this commonplace relationship looks like at its best. Indeed, can friendship truly be the kind of load-bearing fundamental relationship Christ seems to say it is?

Friendship has, I think, been raised to heights of totemic value in modern society. I once reveled in how many “friends” I had on social media, many of whom I’d barely interact with. Such connections helped me curate an image of myself as popular and influential. In her recent book *Friendaholic*, Elizabeth Day suggests that in a fast-moving, unstable world of fleeting romantic and sexual relationships, friendship can offer a psychological life jacket, most particularly for women. For some of my queer friends whose families have rejected them, friendship becomes a way of developing a found family of significant, stable, and supportive relationships.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that friendship has three classic forms: utility, pleasure, and virtue. For Aristotle, the ultimate form of friendship is one shaped around virtues like prudence, courage, and temperance which build up community and the growth of character. I have to say, such friendship doesn’t sound like much fun. And certainly Aristotle understood that such friendships are rare.

Indeed, Aristotle observed that many friendships resolve into relationships of mutual convenience, shaped around what advantages the friends can gain from them, or of pleasure, driven by the rather self-centered but nonetheless attractive pursuit of mutual fun and sensory experience. Aristotle’s sharp analysis of the realities that apply to much that we call friendship surely resonates in an age when many suspect that people are out to get what they can for themselves or are primarily interested in relationships shaped around social media influence and the desire to curate a careful self-image.

Jesus' words to his disciples go further than Aristotle: he says, "You are my friends if you do what I command." This hardly chimes with contemporary ideas of friendship as chosen and voluntary, shaped around shared interests. Jesus' command to love one another reminds me that friendship is part of deeper communal and social obligations and virtues; it is less about individuals sharing interests and pleasures and more about forming community that sets us free to be ever more ourselves. Love becomes the marker of Jesus' new virtuous community of friends and friendship.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre provides a worked-up example of how virtuous friendship is morally impressive (indeed, it is the best of friendship) yet, in our world, somehow lacks in appeal. He does so through an analysis of the character of Fanny Price, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Fanny is steadfast, sensible, and just a bit unassertive. She is a consistent and faithful friend to her love interest, Edmund Bertram. Edmund needs to wake up and realize that, in being his abiding friend, she is the right life partner. Fanny is contrasted with Edmund's other love interest: Mary Crawford, a woman who is capable of genuine affection but uses charm to ensure she has a wide circle of friends.

Fanny gets her man in the end, and MacIntyre argues that this makes Austen the last great effective and imaginative voice of virtue ethics. For Fanny triumphs despite her lack of charm. Charm, MacIntyre says, is the defining modern quality that those who lack virtue use to win friends and influence others. In a readily distracted age, such as ours, Fanny's very constancy is difficult to spot for the virtue it is. Indeed, Edmund takes the whole novel to spot it. If he recognizes Fanny's goodness from their earliest encounter, it is only when he sees through Mary's charm that he can recognize the one substantial person in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny, as the very model of friendship and love.

In a world of liars and charmers, Fanny Price reveals the kind of friendship I think we need for a flourishing church and public community: one shaped around prudence, temperance, consistency, and so on. This is the deep, quiet mood of true friendship captured by Thomas Merton when he says, "The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image." Ultimately, friendship is part of that vocation which sets us free to grow into the likeness of Christ. As we cultivate the virtues of love together, we become friends not only of one another, but of Christ.