

Two of my good friends are former Catholic nuns, Mary Kraus and Susan Stephens (**pictures**). Both of them were college English professors. Mary Kraus even has a doctorate from Notre Dame.

I grew up in the South...Atlanta, Georgia. Until I went to high school I had only met one Catholic in my entire life, an elderly friend of my mother's. In high school the only Catholics that I knew were Hispanic. Yet, these two former Catholic nuns became dear friends because we frequently ate meals together. My adopted parents, Dave and Mary Cummins had an open table. When I lived with them there were always dinner guests. Some were regulars. Every Sunday Susan would join us for dinner after church. Mary Kraus and I both lived with Dad and Mom Cummins in Detroit. Both of them ultimately left the order and taught English at evangelical universities.

Most of us don't have close friends outside of our biological families. We have acquaintances yet few friends. And we're missing God's best! As born-again Christians, though we know that we have a Savior and a Heavenly Father, we often overlook that when we came to Christ, we got a new family – brothers and sisters. As we come to the Communion Table today, I want you to get this truth -- **Communion probably isn't what you think**. Salvation is so much more than having a Savior and going to heaven. When you got saved, you got a whole new family that's constantly growing.

But for many, this is uncomfortable. Maybe like me, you grew up in a dysfunctional family. The family dinner table was a constant battlefield. So, close relationships are a bit difficult. You wonder if things will erupt. But the Lord Jesus intends for the Christian life to push us out of our comfort zones, so what Jesus says in John 13:34-35 is shocking. Please turn there (p. 900).

Did you catch that? *“By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* That means that others don't know we're Christ-followers because we go to church, know our Bibles, act differently, do nice things, etc. Jesus said that the evidence of our Christianity is that we love each other. Can you really love people you don't spend time with? Our neighbors don't want what we've got if don't love each other. We must grow in our love for each other. It's not optional. It's foundational.

God designed us for relationships.. Communion is about connecting with each other. God wired us to need friends. We require meaningful relationships with other people to be happy and whole. As our Creator said in the Owner's Manual, *“It is not good for man to be alone”* (Genesis 2:18).

It's not just a relational need, it's also a physical need. In his book, *The Broken Heart*, Dr. James Lynch (**picture**) cites statistics showing that adults without deep relationships have a death rate twice as high as those who enjoy regular caring interaction with others. Ours is a culture where people scrupulously monitor their cholesterol intake and calorie consumption, but at the same time totally ignore their relational life, which has just as much impact on their physical health as obesity, smoking, high blood pressure and a lack of exercise.

The church is to be a place where people come and have this need met. Churches are to be known for getting relationships right. We're to be a place where fellowship is healthy and strong, where we're known for our love for each other. It's one way where Christians are to let our light shine! This relational admonition is repeated over and over again in the New Testament.

How do we do this? What are the requirements for a church to be a place of love, family and unity—a place where healthy fellowship happens? Let me give you **five key ingredients**. They're easy to remember because they all start with the letter “A.”

The first ingredient is AFFINITY. “Affinity” refers to the common ground we have with others. It refers to those things that attract us to each other so friendships can sprout and grow. Think of “affinity” as “friendship seeds.”

You know what I'm talking about. You meet someone who likes Star Wars as much as you do—or likes the Bears...I mean the Brewers as much as you. You find people who like Target or thrift stores like you do—or whatever.

We all have friends like this with whom we share affinity. Most of these are just surface level relationships. They aren't strong enough to stand the stresses of life. They're like the friendships referred to in Proverbs 18:24 where it says, *“A man of many companions may come to ruin.”* In other words, when it comes to friends, *quantity* doesn't necessarily equal *quality*.

The former head of Chrysler, Lee Iacocca (**picture**), found that out the hard way. The recent movie, *Ford v Ferrari* (**picture**), references his time at Ford. Iacocca said the biggest surprise of his career wasn't when he was fired as president of Ford Motor in 1978, it was what happened after he was fired.

In his autobiography he wrote, *“I was hurting pretty bad. I could have used a phone call from someone who said, ‘Let's get a cup of coffee.’ But most of my ‘friends’ deserted me. It was the greatest shock of my life.”* Obviously, his friends were surface level friends. When hard times came, they went.

But the rest of that familiar proverb says stronger relationships—friends who hang in there with us through tough times are possible, *“There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”* God is telling us that there are people with whom we can share a deep level of affinity. Our common ground isn’t just an activity, it’s common values. We have a consensus with them concerning our core beliefs. We don’t just talk about a task we’re doing together; we share a passion for that task. We share emotions and personal experiences. We connect on a much more profound level.

Gary Inrig (**picture**) packages it this way, *“The quality of a friendship is nearly always determined by the quality of that which unites us.”* The best place to find these deep, satisfying, high-quality relationships is in a church family. It’s here that we find people who, like us, have personally experienced the grace of God. Here we find others who have given their lives to Christ. Because of that, this is where we find kindred spirits and soulmates in the truest sense of the word. Our commonality is based on the fact that we’ve asked Jesus to forgive our sins, come into our hearts and lives—to direct our decisions.

This is what happens not just on Sunday but throughout the week as we worship God by obeying Him—joining Him in His work—giving Him our daily lives in service. One of the most wonderful ways to experience this fellowship we all long for is when we do day to day ministry together. When we unite with other believers working together at something like Foundation, or moving boxes, doing set-up or other ministries. We begin to develop deep soul-satisfying relationships as we fellowship together in these ways.

The Apostle Paul often compared the church to a *body* with each of its members as body parts. No body part can survive long on its own. When surgeons perform a kidney or heart transplant, they have a very limited amount of time. They have to hurry to get that part in a functioning body or it will die. It’s the same with each of us. Cut off from the lifeblood of a local church body, our individual spiritual life soon withers and dries up.

We need a church body to belong to—a place to link up with other believers in working to share God’s love in our neighborhoods, community and world. It’s covenanting together to help one another as we seek to do God’s will.

A local church is where people are most likely to have their relational needs met. It’s where, as a Christian, we’re most likely to find the commonality—the **affinity**—required for this kind of deep friendships we all yearn for.

2. The second ingredient is AFFIRMATION. A church family is a place where you find people who care enough about you to do all they can to help you become the person that Jesus wants you to be. As Hebrews 10:24 puts it, they, *“think of one another and how they can encourage one another to love and to good deeds.”* A church family is a group of people who cheer us on. We all need affirmation to keep on keeping on. It’s easy to get discouraged, so the encouragement of affirmation is a refreshing thing.

As a middle-school student in the 1980s, Lee Buono stayed after school one day to remove the brain and spinal cord from a frog. He did such a good job his science teacher, Mr. Al Siedlecki or “Mr. Sie,” as his students called him from Medford Memorial Middle School in Medford, New Jersey, told him he might become a neurosurgeon someday. And that’s exactly what Buono did.

Years later, after yet another successful surgery, the patient suggested that Dr. Buono call his former teacher who had inspired him and thank him. So Buono did. Siedlecki hadn’t heard from Buono since he was in high school. “I want to thank you,” Buono told him. “I was flabbergasted,”

Siedlecki remembers. “I said, ‘Of all the people in your entire career, you want to thank me?’ (**pictures**)

It was the same feeling I had when...my kids were born.” Siedlecki continued, “I started to cry. It made me feel really important that I had that influence.” Lately, Siedlecki admits, “I was almost afraid to say that I’m a teacher to some people. Not anymore,” he told Buono, “Because you called me, I’m going to help as many people as I can to find their passion too.”

A church is a place where we find friends like that—people who affirm our spiritual gifts and talents and help other brothers and sisters find their passion and calling. It’s what Paul did for young Timothy when he wrote, *“Fan into flame the gift that is in you!”* (2 Tim 1:6) Think of it! Christians who affirm their friends like this join God in guiding them to the good work He prepared in advance for them to do. They fan God’s flame in fellow believers’ lives!

3. The third ingredient is ACCEPTANCE. In most groups, acceptance is based on what you do or don’t do, and how well you do it. It’s kind of like dividing up and picking teams for a baseball game when we were kids. The first picked are the best hitters and fielders. Nobody wants to be picked last.

In a healthy church family acceptance is not based on performance or on what we can do. It’s founded on who we all *are*—sinful people that Jesus valued enough to die for. In Romans 15:7 Paul writes, *“Accept one another just as Christ accepted you.”* How did Jesus do that? He accepted each of us unconditionally. He opened His arms and loved sinners like us even though we were spiritually ugly. Church family members who truly make Jesus Lord do the same for each other.

In his book, *The Fine Art of Friendship*, Ted Engstrom (**picture**) writes, “*We must decide to develop friendships in which we demand nothing in return. Love, in order to work, must be unconditional. Just as God accepts us on an ‘as is’ basis, so, too, must we enter into friendships based on taking the other person unconditionally into the relationship.*”

Be honest—even with our disabilities, character flaws, shortcomings, insecurities, and immaturity, don’t all of us just want to be accepted for who we are? We need to know that somebody accepts us because they want to, not because they have to or because we earn their acceptance. But our natural inclination is not to accept people. We tend to be like the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, quick to judge, criticize and ostracize others. Like them, we want other people to conform to us, so we set up little tests to see whether they measure up. If they don’t—we exclude them much like we did when we were immature teenagers in the way we formed cliques. A true friend, the kind of friend we need, the kind of friend Jesus calls us to be is more mature than that. They obey Proverbs 17:17 where it says, “*A friend loves at all times.*”

Please understand. This doesn’t mean we condone a friend’s sinful behavior or approve of character flaws. It means that we follow Jesus’ example of loving and cherishing all people while extending them grace—the same unmerited grace Jesus extended to us. Galatians 6:1, “*Even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.*” In other words we love sinners—we accept and seek to restore them—remembering that we too have sinned—we too have been forgiven.

We’re better able to accept others if we stay in touch with our own sins, mistakes, deficiencies and blunders. It’s easier to extend the hand of acceptance to a friend if we imagine our other hand simultaneously reaching out to receive acceptance and forgiveness from Christ for our own sins. Part of keeping our fellowship strong is that each of us regularly evaluates our relational life to see how accepting, how grace-driven we’ve been to others.

Let’s do a little of that now. Ask yourself: *Have I been critical and judgmental...or accepting and gracious to others in my church family lately?*

God’s Word says that Jesus was scandalously generous in distributing love. Wherever He went people sensed the unconditional love of God. When Christians obey Jesus’ command, it’s the same in the local church. Grace seasons and strengthens our relationships. It’s what makes our relationships especially deep and meaningful.

I love Philip Yancey. I love his books. We’re both from Atlanta and from the same church. I was able to meet him for breakfast some years ago. In his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, he (**pictures**) tells the story of a concert that took place in Wembley Stadium in London in 1988.

Big name rock groups played in celebration of the changes that had recently taken place in South Africa with the end of Apartheid. For some reason the promoters scheduled an opera singer, Jessye Norman (**picture**), as the closing act. For 12 hours groups like Guns and Roses rocked and blasted the crowd, riling up fans already high on booze and dope. The crowd screamed for more curtain calls. The bands obliged, whipping the people into frenzy.

Finally, the time came for Jessye Norman to sing. A single circle of light followed her, a majestic African-American woman, as she strolled on stage. There was no backup band, no musical instruments, just Jessye and a microphone. Seeing this, the crowd stirred, restlessly. A voice yelled out for more Guns and Roses. Others took up the cry. The scene began to get ugly. I’m sure security people prepared to intervene. Then unaccompanied, Jessy Norman began to sing, very slowly:

*Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see!*

And at that moment a remarkable thing happened. 70,000 fans fell silent before her solo of grace. By the time she reached the second verse, “*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved,*” that soprano had the crowd in her hands. When she reached the third verse, “*’Twas grace has brought me safe this far, and grace will lead me home,*” several thousand fans were singing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago.

*“When we’ve been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we first begun”*

Jessy Norman later confessed that she had no idea what power descended on Wembley Stadium that night. But you and I know. It was the power of thirst. People thirst for grace. When we or when any group of Christians allows grace to flavor the way we treat each other, the world around us stops what they’re doing and listens just as they did to Jessye Norman that night. They want what we’ve got. They long to drink from God’s well of grace.

4. The fourth ingredient is AUTHENTICITY. Authenticity is hard to find and not just on a surface level. All of us have too many mask-wearing relationships. It's even found in the products we buy. Tons of products are designed to imitate the real thing. There's plastic decking that looks like real wood. Vinyl flooring that looks like ceramic tile. You can purchase fake fur or gold jewelry. There's even a product called, *Spray-on Mud* (picture). It's designed for use on the outside of your SUV. That way it appears you use your expensive gas-guzzler for more than taking the kids to soccer practice. Spray it on and people may think you're a skilled off-road driver who just returned from a wilderness adventure. Apparently, \$15 a can seems a reasonable price for the appearance of authenticity.

But for relationships to satisfy, fake it won't make it. We need friendships in which we feel free to be real with each other. Authentic relationships are characterized by self-disclosure, transparency and vulnerability. There's an increasing consistency between what we're like on the inside and how we act in each other's presence.

The Lord Jesus exhibited authenticity in His relationship with His disciples. Think how vulnerable the all-powerful Son of God was when He conceded to His closest friends in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death*" (Mark 10:24).

Luke hints that the church at Jerusalem followed Jesus' example in this when he wrote: "*They had everything in common.*" In other words they were each fully known by others. There were no masks, no pretense. Everything was open. They held nothing back. They knew each other's past failures—knew who'd been a hooker, who'd been a thief, who'd been a murdering zealot, or who'd been an adulterer. They all knew who everyone was before they experienced the grace of Jesus. Everything about everyone was common knowledge. That was okay because their mutual experience of Jesus' acceptance and forgiveness enabled them to be authentic with each other.

The truth is we all have failed and do fail. We all have weaknesses. True community takes place when we can stand up and admit that without fear. We can say, "My name is John and I'm an alcoholic," or "My name is Betty and I have breast cancer, and that terrifies me." Or, "My name is Steve and my marriage is falling apart." Or, "My name is Bill and I have AIDS." Or "My name is Alice and I'm lonely." Or, "My name is Ed and I have a hard time being around people—I lose my cool sometimes." Or, "I'm a new mom and I love my baby, but I'm feeling very overwhelmed."

For communion and community to happen we have to pull off our masks and be honest and open, strugglers together, to weep and rejoice together as brothers and sisters in Christ. When this happens—when we're honest with each other—we open the door to the giving and receiving of the love and support we all need to continue on toward Christlikeness.

Author, Robert Fulghum (picture) reminded his readers of the childhood game, *Hide & Seek*. Most of us played that game as kids. But there could be a problem. Sometimes someone hid too well and no one could find him or her. Sooner or later he'd show up mad because everybody had quit looking. Then, everybody would get mad right back because he wasn't playing the game the way it should be played. All Hide & Seek players know you have to be able to be found!

Then Fulghum told of a doctor who discovered that he had terminal cancer. He didn't want to make his family and friends suffer through his illness with him, so he kept his secret and eventually died—unexpectedly from their perspective. Everybody said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell anyone. But his family and friends didn't feel that way. They were angry that he didn't feel as if he needed them and didn't trust their strength. It hurt them beyond words that he didn't even say good-bye. Fulghum writes that this man "hid too well."

In a healthy church we don't hide. We say, "Come on in, wherever you are. Hide & Seek is over. It's time to be found. You can be real here."

That leads me to mention something vital about authenticity. It requires safety. People have to know it's okay to be real. Many don't open up because they fear what others will do with the knowledge they'll gain. They fear betrayal, condemnation and judgment. Fellowship can't happen if people don't know it's safe to be real. **Affinity, affirmation, acceptance, authenticity...and finally.**

5. The fifth ingredient is ASSISTANCE. This refers to helping each other, putting the needs of others before our own. It's what we see in the Jerusalem church where it says: "*Selling their possession and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.*" (Acts 2:47)

Too often people enter relationships with a selfish agenda. Someone said that if Galileo were alive today, he'd have concluded that the sun revolves around himself. Unfortunately, we all share that egocentric attitude to some degree. When we enter a relationship selfishly, we always end up disappointed.

But Christians who help each other, Christians who help carry each other's burdens, learn that they always end up being blessed. They learn that they benefit in the long run. As Booker T. Washington said, "*You cannot hold a man down without staying down with him.*" The flip side is true as well: if you lift someone up by making their struggles your own—you'll find yourself lifted up. Let me quote Ted Engstrom again: "*You are allowed to keep only that which you consciously give away. Give away your friendship and you will receive friendship in return. Give away yourself and your 'better' self will return to you many times over.*"

Can I share something that weighs heavily on me here at Grace? It's probably going to surprise some of you. Many of you are great at helping others BUT you stink at allowing others to help you. And we all need help from time to time! So, here's the problem. You get the opportunity to be a blessing, but you're not allowing others that same opportunity.

So, let me repeat this, we all need help! None of us have our act together. If you have your act together, you're in the wrong church. So, please let others get the blessing too. Let others know that you need help so that they be a blessing to you and can get the blessing of serving Jesus by serving you.

Conclusion: You may have heard this story. Years ago something happened in the Special Olympics. There was a race. Each of the runners had Down's Syndrome. They were close together as they came around the track toward the finish line. But then one of the runners stumbled and fell. When that happened, the rest of the runners stopped. They went back as a group, helped the runner who'd fallen to stand up, and then they all started running the race again.

We often describe people with disabilities like this as being mentally or emotionally challenged. But that's not accurate with those runners. Those Special Olympians were ahead of most of us. They showed that they were very sound emotionally and relationally, very Christ-like, whereas most "normal" athletes wouldn't think of going back to help a fallen runner.

No, they obviously understood and practiced this principle of fellowship—giving assistance to one another—bearing others' burdens. Paul referred to it in 1 Corinthians 12:26 when he said, *"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."*

This kind of burden-bearing, joy-sharing stuff doesn't just happen. It's intentional. Sometimes when we see people who have a really deep friendship like this we think, "Those people are so lucky to have close friends like that."

But luck has absolutely nothing to do with it. It's a choice. People have close friendships because they choose to develop them. We make this choice because of our experience with Jesus. The fact that He carried the burden of our sin on the cross inspires us to bear one another's burdens.

Communion is about what Jesus has done for us and what we do for each other. We have nothing to offer the neighbors if we don't first have communion here, if we're not growing and learning to love each other more and more.

As we close, please ask 3 questions within your own heart:

- *Am I growing in my love for Jesus?*
- *Am I growing in my love for my brothers and sisters in Christ*
- *Am I growing in my love for my neighbors and community?*