

Making new friends is important, and as we age is not as easy to do. Most of us now use electronic means – like FACEBOOK and TWITTER to meet new people. Those systems obviously work. Millions of people use them. But there are other ways. I'm trying to make friends outside FACEBOOK while applying FACEBOOK principles. So here's what I'm doing. Every day while I'm walking down the street, I stop passers-by and ask them to wait for a moment. I then tell them what I have eaten this day, how I feel right at the moment we've met, and explain in great detail what I did the night before. Then I tell them what I plan to do the rest of the day and with whom. When I can, I mention the hour each event will take place. I show them pictures of my family, my friends, of me gardening and cooking, the dishes I've made and the wines I've drunk, watering the flower pots, standing in front of landmarks I've visited, driving around town, having lunch with friends and doing what anybody and everybody does every day. And when they talk to me, I carefully listen and relate to their conversations. When we're through visiting, I give them a 'thumbs up' and tell them I like them. And you know what? It works just like FACEBOOK! I already have 4 people following me: 2 police officers, a private investigator, and a psychiatrist.

First, some background on our gospel passage. The naming of a child is an important part of the Scripture passage before us. In fact, there are 2 important names given, both belonging to the same person, but each helping us to know more about Him, each having a huge theological significance.

HE SHALL BE CALLED JESUS. The reading tells us that before Jesus was born, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, informing him that the child Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that he should not fear to take Mary as his wife. Further, the angel even told Joseph what to name the child – Jesus.

Jesus (Joshua) was a common name. It was the Bob of the first century. We know of one other person in the New Testament itself named Jesus. He was a companion to the apostle Paul and is mentioned in Colossians 4:11 in a list of people sending greetings to the church at Colossae. And Josephus Flavius, the first-century Jewish historian, mentions no fewer than 20 different men named Jesus.

Thus, the child whom God sent to be the Savior of the world was given a name common to the time and place, one that by itself did not set Him apart from the rest of the human race. "Jesus" was the name that would have been entered into the records at the Bethlehem County Courthouse, if there had been one in those days. In the case of this particular child, that name was sometimes used in conjunction with further identifiers, such as Jesus of Nazareth; or Jesus, son of Joseph; or Jesus, son of David (referring to His ancestry), but all these were actual labels referring to the one who was born to Mary around the beginning of the first century A.D.

Jesus means "God saves". The angel who appears to Joseph alludes to that meaning when he says, "...you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." This child was given a name that would be a constant reminder of the saving grace of God. But once Matthew has told us what the angel said, he goes on to make his own observation. He tells us that the angel's announcement to Joseph about the divine origin of the child and the naming fulfilled something Isaiah had written about 7 centuries earlier, and Matthew then quotes Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." And that name, as Matthew hastens to tell us, means "God is with us." This will be one of the great themes of Matthew's gospel, with the words of Jesus as He ascends to heaven after His resurrection: "And behold, I will be with you always, even to the ends of the earth."

Second, let's tease this out a bit. We so often hear that God is the author of our salvation through Jesus; that Jesus saves us from our sins. But what does this mean on a deeper level? One way to understand it is to grasp that God created us to have connection, close association, communion with Him. But to have that connection means that our hearts get changed, and that is salvation. Among the things that make us unfit for God is our sins and self-centeredness. But when we allow Jesus into our lives, He makes it possible for us to change, to become fit for communion with God. What God did with Jesus was to send Him to move us from where we are, from where we cannot be in communion with Him, from where we are separated from God, to where we need to be --seated at the table of fellowship with Him in the daily round of life as well as in the kingdom to come. (Adapted from HOMILETICS, Nov-Dec 2007, pages not cited, Timothy F. Merrill, Executive Editor) Jesus fully entered into our human, broken, mixed-up, screwed-up world, because He loved us. Simply because He loved us.

A story can best illustrate this. Dr. Maxwell Maltz, a plastic surgeon and best-selling author, tells a remarkable story that speaks to me of the love that caused Jesus to go to the cross to save us from our sins. A man had been injured in a fire while attempting to save his parents from a burning house. He couldn't get to them. They perished. His face was burned and disfigured. He mistakenly interpreted his pain as God's punishment. The man wouldn't let anyone see him – not even his wife.

She went to Dr. Maltz for help. He told the woman not to worry. "I can restore his face." The wife was unenthusiastic. Her husband had repeatedly refused any help. She knew he would again. Then why her visit? "I want you to disfigure my face so I can be like him!" she said. "If I can share in his pain, then maybe he will let me back into his life."

Dr. Maltz was shocked. He denied her request but was so moved by this woman's love that he went to speak with her husband. Knocking on the man's bedroom door, he called loudly, "I'm a plastic surgeon, and I want you to know that I can restore your face." No response. "Please come out." Again there was no answer. Still speaking through the door Dr. Maltz told the man of his wife's proposal. "She wants me to disfigure her face, to make her face like yours in the hope that you will let her back into your life. That's how much she loves you." There was a brief moment of silence, and then, ever so slowly, the doorknob began to turn." (Cited by Max Lucado, NEXT DOOR SAVIOR, pages not noted)

Jesus allowed Himself to be debased, disfigured, so that we might be saved from our sins. Jesus. Savior. God of our salvation.

And third, Emmanuel, God-is-with-us. This adds a further dimension to our understanding of God-in-Jesus. "God is with us" is a message we need to hear. Our world has layer upon layer of troubles and our own personal encounters with life are not all sweetness and light either. Jesus is with us as we go through all of our life experiences, giving us a model and instruction. He was hated, but He hated no one; He was met by anger, but He did not respond in anger; and He was killed by jealousy, but He was jealous of and hurt no one. He was on the receiving end of murderous anger, jealousy, and hatred, but He never passed them on to others. Instead, He carried hatred, anger, jealousy, and wound long enough until He was able to transform them into forgiveness, compassion, and love. Only someone who has already sweated real blood to remain true to what is highest and best will be able to look at his or her own murderers and say: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." This nobility of soul is what Emmanuel, God-with-us, modeled. (Rolheiser, THE HOLY LONGING, p. 224)

There is another passage in the New Testament that sheds further light on this. In Hebrews 13:5 we read these words: "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you!'" What does 'never' mean.

In the original Greek, 'never' is really a compounding of 5 negatives. Not that each negative is added to another. Rather, each negative is MULTIPLIED by the other. It really should read, "I will never, no, not ever, no never leave you or forsake you!" It is a synergistic compounding negative. It's a forever never which has no exceptions. What does 'leave' mean? In the original Greek it means 'to leave behind, to abandon, to give up on, to send back.' Well, then, so far our verse will read: "I will never, no not ever, no never leave you behind, abandon you, give up on you, or send you back!" What does 'forsake' mean? In the Greek it means, "to leave one in a helpless state, to disregard." It also can be further expanded to include "not relaxing my watchfulness over you." To this point then, our verse in the full, amplified version reads: "I will never, no not ever, no never give up on you, abandon you, leave you behind, cause you not to survive, leave you helpless, nor shall I ever relax concerning keeping my presence with you!" In other words, we can be at peace. God will always be there for us, for He is Emmanuel, God-with-us. (from Robert Strand, ESPECIALLY FOR THE HURTING HEART, pages not cited)

If we get this, it becomes a wonderful model for us in our various roles of spouses, parents, and friends. It's one of the most important messages that we deliver to one another – in just 3 words: "I'll be there." If we've ever had to call a plumber over a weekend, we know how good these words can feel. "I'LL BE THERE." If we've ever been stranded on the road with car trouble and called a friend, we know how comforting these words can feel "I'LL BE THERE."

"Grandma, I'm graduating in June!" "I'LL BE THERE."

"Honey, I'm stuck at the office and can't get to the airport to pick up my sister!" "I'LL BE THERE!"

"Mom, the baby cries all night, and if I don't get some sleep I'll die!" "I'LL BE THERE!" (PREACHING WELL, p. 3-4)

We call a friend because we are having a medical crisis and are being taken to the hospital, and they respond: "I'LL BE THERE."

So, my friends, we have already been given the best Christmas present we will ever receive in Jesus, Emmanuel. A savior, Jesus, and Emmanuel, a God who is always with us, there for us, and will never forsake or abandon us. No matter what stupid stuff we do. We should never doubt that God has no limits to His mercy and love for us. No matter what. Amen