

Uneasy friendship (Mark 8:31-38)

Jesus and Peter care about each other enough to call each other out.

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue



Here's something you could only say to a really good friend: "Get behind me, Satan."

That's what Peter got hit with after expressing concern for his friend. Jesus had just told the disciples that he was going to suffer and be killed. He also told them that he

would rise again, but they couldn't hear that part. They were too alarmed that he was predicting his own death. I would have been alarmed too.

We are told that Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Peter rebuked *Jesus*, and not the other way around. Peter had the kind of intimate relationship with Jesus that allowed him to tell him off in order to set him straight. I can imagine Peter saying, "Quit talking like that, Jesus. You need to change your attitude. It's bad for you and it's bad for the group."

But Jesus responded, "Get behind me, Satan. For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Or as we might put it today: "Shut up already. You're missing my entire point."

I love this argumentative interchange between Peter and Jesus. It reminds me that they had a real relationship and argued, as close friends do. There's a distinct intimacy in their exchange. They cared about each other enough to call each other out.

Contrast this to other, thinner definitions of friendship. Someone will say of a best friend: "I can tell her anything and she accepts me totally." But anyone can be that kind of friend. What could be easier than listening and offering unconditional . . . what? Is it "love" when you let your friend prattle on without offering judgment? I don't think so. That may be unconditional listening, but it's not unconditional love. Love entails caring enough to struggle, to ask hard questions and to occasionally rebuke.

Sometimes I hear people say: "We can talk about anything and he never judges." Well of course you can talk about anything to someone who is guaranteed not to argue. But what is the point? You'll never learn anything. You'll never be changed. How could this become a model of friendship anywhere but at a narcissists' convention? I would just as soon stay home as go out to spend time with that dull friend. Friends are who God uses to teach us what our families can't.

Much is made of the notion that we choose our friends, but we don't choose our families. I disagree with the statement. I think we choose our families all the time—when we invite Aunt Bess for Thanksgiving, for example, but decline to invite Uncle Jay. We stay closely in touch by telephone and e-mail with one sibling and exchange bland Christmas cards with another. We may not have chosen where to be born, but as we age we do choose with whom and how to be in relationship.

I am not sure that we choose our friends. Most of our friendships, when we examine their origins, are born in happenstance. We ended up as a friend of someone with children in the same school. We worked together. We served on the same committee at church. We may choose among people, but our pool of possible friends is circumstantial.

You could call it God's grace when we fall into friendship with people with whom we may have as little in common as children the same age, or the same master's degree. Naturally, within such friendships we will see the world differently, occasionally argue, and thus help one another to change and grow.

John may have been the disciple Jesus loved, but we have the most recorded arguing between Jesus and Peter. In a deep friendship like theirs, there should always be room for a holy rebuke.

Bookshelves are full of tomes on how to improve your marriage, your sex life, your dating techniques and your manners. Our culture worships the romantic relationship but almost ignores friendship. We seek to improve ourselves as partners and parents, but where are the books teaching me how to be a better friend?

The Bible may be one such book. Again and again Jesus gives evidence that he had friendships and that they were not easy ones. After Jesus and Peter argued, Jesus spoke the hard truth to the crowd: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Jesus did not choose his friends from a pool of perfect people. Imperfect Peter later denied his friendship with Jesus three times. In that lonely and desperate moment, Peter must have rebuked himself in his absent friend's name. Yet he went on to become the rock of the church—a rock prepared and shaped by friendship.

One of life's most underestimated treasures is the rich friendship between those who care enough to argue. In my friendship with God, amidst the grace and mercy sometimes it's the occasional rebuke that most reminds me I am loved.