

I. Advanced organizer

A. How many people can a person connect with? **How many friends could one actually have?**

1. As we learned a couple of weeks ago, according to the ancient philosopher Aristotle, the number is not infinite. **“A friend to all is a friend to none,” the philosopher said.** You can't be friends with everyone, no one can. Relationships are a limited resource. But how limited exactly?
2. **Robin Dunbar is a British anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist who is well known in academic circles that focus on the science behind friendship, because he is the namesake of what's come to be known as Dunbar's number.** Dunbar's number is based in evolutionary science and anthropology. It comes from his theory that was first proposed almost 30 years ago and has been refined through the decades since. The theory was connected to work that was being done around what's called **the social brain**, where Dunbar and other researchers looked at the brain size and structure of different primates, and considered how they correlated with the complexities of their social worlds. Essentially researchers discovered that there is a limit on how complex a social system a species of animal can maintain, based on the size of the neocortex in the brain of that animal. The neocortex is the part of the brain associated with cognition and language. What Dunbar and other's discovered was that **animals who had more neocortex in their brains were able to maintain more social connections. Those animals could have more friends.**
  - a) Looking at the data on various animals and their brains, as well as the size of their groups, and then looking both at human brains structure as well as historical data about human group sizes and how they seem to have functioned through history, Robin Dunbar and his associates came up with a number, **Dunbar's number, that is supposed to indicate the amount of stable relationships a human being can have at any one time.** This isn't just people you vaguely know, or cross paths with on an occasional basis, but people you can have a meaningful relationship with. **What do you think Dunbar's number might be?** (Let folks guess) The answer: **150**
  - b) Now Dunbar himself is clear that **this number is really an average.** There's more like a range depending on personality and setting. Some folks are fine with a relational network of only 100. Other particularly extroverted folks might have more like 200 plus meaningful relationships at a time. But on the whole, most of us peak around 150. At any given time, we could have around 150 people we feel positively connected to. 150 people we might call some version of a friend.

B. Well, I'm starting us off this morning talking about the number of friends scientists theorize our brains can handle **because this is the second conversation we're having in our fall series, I'm calling “Friendship Matters”.** In this series, we're exploring the role friendship plays in our lives generally, including our spiritual journeys. Scientists and doctors have confirmed what spiritual teachers have known for generations, it's not good for humans to be alone. Having a rich social life brings with it all kinds of physical benefits, it correlates with lower blood pressure, with stronger immune systems, lower rates of depression, substance abuse, overall life expectancy. **But what does it mean to have a rich social life?** Is it just making sure you have around 150 people you can reasonably say you know? What is important about these relationships? And what makes a relationship one you might actually call a friendship?

1. It turns out that the theory behind Dunbar's number is a bit more complex, and I think a bit more helpful than just the headline number demonstrates. **In fact Dunbar's number is**

really a series of numbers, numbers arranged in concentric circles, which decades of social research seem to confirm are quite common across people groups and settings.

- a) The truth is we don't just have a set of 150 relationships that are all the same, of course. Our connection to the people we live with or enjoy hanging out with on a weekend is different than the work acquaintance we chat with occasionally.
- b) It turns out that the famous Dunbar's number of **150 is really like one circle of several**. It's a circle in which 2/3 off the people are what we might call **casual friends**, the kind of folks we'd considering inviting to our wedding or funeral, but may not interact with very regularly. Inside that broad circle of 150, there's a subset about a third it's size. **This is about 50 people you might consider "good friends"**, people you want to invite if you're throwing a back yard BBQ or for a special birthday celebration. Within that crew, there's another subset, one that Dunbar calls **"best friends"**. **This is generally close to around 15 people** that are your main social companions, people you are most likely to hang out with on a weekend or call when you need some encouragement. And then within that group of 15, there's the core, **what Dunbar calls "close friends"**. **Most of us have somewhere around 5 people in that category of our very closest friends**. The people who are most likely to drop everything and be there for us when the world falls apart. And then in that innermost circle of intimacy, we may have a romantic partnership or core platonic friendship right at the middle with us.
- c) If you look at the broader diagram, Dunbar proposes that there are outer rings as well. His model theorizes that 150 casual friendships exist within **500 folks that you might consider acquaintances**, **1500 for whom you might recognize their names**, and full **5000 for whom you might know their faces**. So when you see the full spectrum, from a potential of 5000 faces you might know to the main person you spend your time with, you see a lot of layers of relationships that make up a social world. **Friendship, it seems comes in many degrees**.

II. In the life of Jesus there's an interesting story that appears in three of the four gospels and comes at a critical turning point in the narrative, as things began to escalate and Jesus seems more fixed on the end he senses is coming. The story is of a strange encounter that Jesus brings three people along for, not long after one of them, Peter, has declared that he believes Jesus to be the Messiah, God's anointed one who was to come and bring liberation. Here's how the story is shared by Matthew in Chapter 17.

**A. "After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.**

**4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."**

**5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"**

**6 When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. 7 But**

**Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.**

**9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”**

1. There’s a lot going on in this story, and I’m not going to get into most of it. But what I do want to focus on is the question of **who is a part of this moment**. Clearly this is meant to be a time of revelation - something important is being disclosed about Jesus to certain people. Jesus’ identity as particularly connected in a mysterious way to the Divine and what God has been doing through the people of Israel - through characters like Moses and Elijah - that is being clarified in this moment. And this is happening at a time when Jesus is kind of a big deal. Thousands of people through Israel know who he is. If the supernatural light show on the mountain really wanted to make a splash, doing it publicly in front of the crowds of thousands would generate a real spectacle.
2. But that’s not what Jesus wants that day on the mountain. **This is a private moment**. He seems to be very intentional about that. Most of us, when we think of Jesus’ band of people, **the number we think of is 12, and that’s for good reason**. Jesus does call a particular circle of disciples around himself - 12 young men whom he invests the bulk of his time and energy into during the three or so years of his ministry, eating with them, traveling with them, preaching and healing with them in his midst.
3. But like the concentric circles of Dunbar’s number, **the 12 is just one layer of Jesus’ social world**. Beyond the 12 there are larger circles. At one point, Jesus has a group of followers he has trained that he sends out in his name to try their hands at ministry. The gospel of Luke records this as **a group of 72**. Beyond the 72 were various rings of people who were connecting with Jesus, people who welcomed him in the towns he went to, people who funded him, people who housed him. These were probably in his crew of 150 or so. And then there were the people who showed up in the crowds of thousands to hear him preach. Within the group of 12, he has his closer core friends. **These three - Peter, James, and John - show up in important places**. They are people Jesus uniquely trusts. They are people he wants to reveal more of himself to in a particular way. He may not be ready for all to understand his special connection to God, but he wants these three to know.
4. The transfiguration on the mountain isn’t the only moment either that we see Jesus pull aside his inner group. When he’s called to the home of Jairus, the leader of a synagogue, whose daughter had recently died, **he invited just these three to accompany him as he raised her from the dead**, once again telling these three to keep it to themselves.
5. And most heartbreakingly when he reached the climax of his story, his most difficult night, knowing the betrayal that was happening in his midst and the tragic but necessary torture and death that was coming, **he begged these three alone to keep him company in the Garden of Gethsemane**. Pulling Peter, James, and John aside, he once again made an intimate disclosure. **“My soul is deeply grieved, even to the point of death”** he told them, something he did not speak to anyone else. The time in the garden ended up a disappointing encounter, these friends could not keep themselves awake as Jesus asked, but **Jesus’ trust of them and willingness to open himself up and be vulnerable to them**, I believe is intended to be a model to all of us, that we too need layers of relationships in our lives. Particularly, we need safe, robust layers in the center,

with people we can reveal our inner selves to, and ask them to stand watch with us in the depth of night when our souls are grieved, even to the point of death.

- III. So what distinguishes those in our outer circles from those we call on in the night? How do we nurture this set of concentric circles, particularly the inner ones - the 50, the 15, the 5?
- A. I think Robin Dunbar and Jesus himself would likely answer the question the same way: **a core component is time**. What puts someone in a closer circle to us isn't simply the people with the best profile pics, the highest IQs or who have the most winning personalities. What distinguishes the 5 from the 15 from the 50 from the 150, or for Jesus you might say the 3, from the 12, from the 72 - it's the amount of time we spend connecting with that person. **Time together is the resource that makes the biggest difference in moving a relationship from acquaintance to casual friend to close friend**. Friendships don't just happen. Friendships take time.
- B. Again social scientists have done a lot of work to figure out why people become friends with certain people over others, and there are certainly are a number of factors: personalities, shared interests, similar background experiences, and such make a difference in who people click with. **But the investment in time is really key in moving into a closer circle**, or when there's less time to distribute because things have gotten in the way, the lack of time is often the main reason people move out a tier or two in our social structure.
- C. Many of us have been through some phases of life at this point. The 20s is an era when we may have cultivated a lot of friendships but these circles may have changed rather quickly as we moved for school or work, and our social lives had more upheaval. People moved in and out of the circles regularly, showing what Dunbar calls **a high churn rate**. But by our 30s, things may have stabilized. The churn rate slows. If we're partnered, that takes up more of our social world, and if we have kids, even more so. Some say the 30s is the decade where friendships "come to die" because **as people transition to family life they have a lot less relational space for those who are not in their household**. But the reality is our social worlds shift as our life shifts regularly. This isn't bad in and of itself, but it might be helpful for us to be mindful of, and particularly to pay attention to **how robust our inner circles are**. What are we doing to maintain those inner layers? How are we making choices about our limited resource of time to foster friendships that will be sustaining?
- D. **Jeff Hall is a researcher who wanted to quantify the amount of time it takes to move from an outer circle to an inner one**. And after a number of studies, he came up with some predictions which Dunbar and his team seem to validate. According to Hall it can take around 50 hours together for a relationship to move from acquaintance to casual friendship, around 100 hours to call someone a genuine friend (say move them into your circle of 50) and **at least 200 hours to move towards the best friend sphere**. All of us are busy, and we all only have so much time to distribute. But what much of this research shows is that how we choose to spend our time and with whom makes a real impact on the depth and strength of our relational world.
- E. **This pandemic has upended so many things, and one for sure has been all of our social networks**. We survived many months in which our social contact was forcibly restricted. Some of us transitioned easily to maintaining social contact virtually. Some found that a real struggle. Likely all of us have had our circles of relationships strained and challenged in different ways. We might struggle to know who to put in which circle at this point. **Can we even call someone a friend anymore if we haven't spent much time with them in the last couple of years because of the pandemic?** Even now, different ones of us are in different places in our comfort and ability to experience meaningful connection. It

will take time to recalibrate and rebuild our rings of relationships. Clocking 50 to 100 to 200 hours of connection with other people we don't live with for most of us doesn't happen very quickly. It takes patience. It takes effort. It takes time.

- F. Now I'm naming all of this heady social science-y stuff that I find interesting, and hopefully you do to some degree, but I also want to name that **there are limits to its usefulness when we try to apply what science says about our human habits and trends to our actual relational lives**. The goal is not to say because you haven't spent a couple hundred hours with someone you can't call them a best friend, or to say because you already have fifteen in the best friend circle you can't take any more, or that you're not gonna accept a dinner invite because isn't from in your inner five. **The goal is not to create bounded sets of exclusion that keep us from one another, or to create some sort of hierarchy of value around our different relationships**. I think the models are more helpful just to help us recognize that our social worlds are more like centered sets. We have the most vibrant connections with those who are going in the same direction as us, who are called to the same things, who are putting their energy in the same places, whose lives are centered in similar places, and that nurturing those connections while we gather can bring real depth and satisfaction to our lives.
- G. When I think about this whole view of friendship in circles, and put it together with what we are all doing here at Haven on a Sunday morning, I personally find it helpful and hopeful to think about. My hope is that as we invest time here together, that **this is a place where at least some of our friendship needs are being met**. These hours spent worshipping together, learning together, building a different kind of spiritual community that's safe and diverse and Jesus-centered together, all of those hours are also helping us grow in our investment in each other in ways that help fill out some of our friendship circle needs. Maybe recognizing that **encourages us to be a bit more intentional with one another**, perhaps extend an invitation to grab coffee or send a text to check in on someone during the week, because we want to keep one another's friendship circles satisfying and full.
- H. Of course **we're not all going to be one another's best friends. And that's ok and natural**. None of us have enough bandwidth for that many best friends. **Jesus didn't have enough bandwidth for that**. But I do hope that as we continue to gather, to connect, to build spiritual community we will continue to cultivate relationships with one another that are life giving and meaningful, and find that a lot of these people are in our ring of 50, and hopefully a few might be in our 15 or maybe even eventually our 5. Because the benefits of investing in one another over time, the benefits of cultivating deep sustained relationships, that can see us through our darkest nights, the benefits of letting friendship grow through the years - that has the power to sustain. **That I believe is what scripture imagined when it told us it was not good for humans to be alone**. That I believe is what Jesus called us to when he called spiritual community to **embody the Kin-dom of God**. That was what he hoped for when he said, when two or more of you gather in my name I am there in the midst of you. **We, in friendship with one another, have the capacity to embody the Divine presence**. We have the capacity to be the presence of Jesus for one another. We have the capacity to make the love of the Divine manifest as we embody that love for one another and for the other people in our lives God has gifted us with.
- I. And that finally brings us to **the story I want us to end with today**, a story from folks in our community of what this can look like, when friendship is given the gift and the investment of time. Brent, Mari, John and Kim have a unique relationship. They embody something that is rare particularly in our hyper urban transient Bay Area culture - **a deep friendship that has**

**lasted for decades.** You don't have to know them well to know that their friendship with one another is a powerful force in each of their lives. It's clearly a gift to each of them, one that I personally find really hopeful and inspiring. And so I thought, throughout this series, it could be helpful to hear from some different folks in our community who paint different pictures of what friendship can look like. Not all of our friendships will be the same, nor should they be. Relationships, like people, are unique. But I think there are things we can learn from each other as we hear stories from one another's friendship lives, and today I think there's something to learn about how the investment of time in friendship can bring real life, meaning, and joy.

IV. Interview with the Jensens and DeWitts

- A. How long have you all been friends? Tell us the story of how you met. How has your friendship changed over time?
- B. What have been some highlights of your life together?
- C. Where have you been challenged and how did that shape your friendship?
- D. How has your friendship contributed to your experience of Jesus-centered faith?
- E. What makes your friendship work and what allows it to grow?

V.