

WHO CALLS YOU friend?

Reaching out to internationals

By Shelly McClanahan



Two first-graders, sweaty from running on the playground, approached the bench where the teachers sat. One was a first generation Asian-American boy who was fluent in English, the other a recent immigrant from South America who could barely say hello. With a big smile, the Asian-American student proclaimed, "I don't know what he's saying, but we're best friends!" Then they ran off toward the monkey bars.

One of the best parts of my job as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher is watching friendships like this grow. I have observed students whose backgrounds are vastly different develop friendships that transcend those differences.

There was the middle school girl from Mexico who became best friends with a boy from China. She gave him a Mexican nickname, and he picked up some Spanish—asking friends if he could borrow a *lápiz* (pencil) and telling me he had a *pregunta* (question).

Then there were the high schoolers. I loved watching them walk into my classroom together, smiling and laughing, simply being teenage girls. They were from different parts of the world, had different religions, and in the beginning, couldn't speak the same language. In my class, however, they developed common ground through learning English. They even developed their own code for talking about boys. Each boy had the name of a different cell phone provider: "I saw T-Mobile in the cafeteria!" or "AT&T talked to me today!"

Befriending Those Who Are Different

What a privilege it is to get to know those who've had different life experiences than us, from the big ones (such as being a refugee or having lived under various types of governmental systems), to the smaller ones (such as foods, clothes, and holidays). When our perspective of the world broadens, it allows us to see how big God is, and how He is at work in every nation, tribe, and tongue. Our limited perspective of an "American" God blossoms into one of the God of the universe, who sent Jesus to die for us all.

What Keeps Us Apart

We sometimes steer clear of those who are different from us. Hesitancy may keep us from building relationships. We're not sure what to say, or if we'll be understood. Other times, the busyness of life keeps us from knowing others. Getting to know someone who is not already in our circle takes time and energy.

Complacency may be another reason we don't reach out. A volunteer at a church ESL program told me, "I complained that too many people live here who can't speak English. Then I realized I was complaining without doing anything. I'm not a teacher, but I can watch students' children while they go to class." Her determination to act made a positive impact in the lives of others.

Friendliness in the Bible—Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40)

God often makes divine appointments for us to meet people who are different from us. This happened to Philip. He was told by an angel to go to the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On the way, he saw a man from Ethiopia reading from the Book of Isaiah. The Spirit urged Philip to go to the man. Philip obeyed, and the results were life-changing for the Ethiopian. Philip extended friendship to the Ethiopian by joining him in his chariot and explaining that what he was reading was the good news of Jesus. The man believed and Philip baptized him as a new believer. What a beautiful result of showing friendship to another!

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

The Good Samaritan is often presented as an example of reaching out to others, but why were his actions special?

There was much animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. They all originally belonged to the twelve tribes of Israel, but when the kingdom of Israel split, the Samaritans were part of the Northern Tribe, and the Jews were part of the Southern Tribe. The Samaritans intermarried with the people of Assyria, bringing more animosity from the Jews, because this led the Samaritans to follow other gods. They had become as different from one another as they could be.

When the Samaritan saw the Jewish man lying beaten on the side of the road, he had compassion on him. Rather than focusing on their differences and what their

cultures might encourage them to do (as the priest and the Levite previously had), the Samaritan had pity on the Jew. A terrible thing had happened to him, and the Samaritan had the means to help. He aided someone who may have scorned him had the situation been reversed.

Jesus Calls Us Friend

Perhaps the most amazing friendship of all is between us and Jesus. Yes, He calls us friends! In John 15:15, Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

Who could be more different than the omniscient God of the universe and us—flawed, sinful beings? And yet He still wants to know us. He reaches out to us. He loves us in a way we can never comprehend. And we have done nothing to earn or deserve this affection. Jesus shows us the perfect example of befriending those who are different from us.

How to Be a Friend to Those Who Are Different

Often in the Bible, we're urged to come to the aid of foreigners in our land (Deut. 10:19; Matt. 25:40; Rom.12:13). There are many ways to do this.

- **Volunteer in a local adult ESL class.** Maybe your church has one. If you don't feel comfortable teaching, you could help with the nursery or provide snacks.
- **Get to know a neighbor or coworker who is new to your area.** Invite them to your church or for a meal in your home.
- **Offer to make your church services in languages other than English.** The services could happen concurrently in different parts of the building or at different times.
- **Be open to learning about other cultures.** Attend events that highlight the various cultures in your area. Be aware of who lives around you and what specific needs they might have.

There were two other culturally diverse students at my school who became good friends. One was a boy from India. The other was the daughter of a local American pastor. One day, the Indian boy came into my class carrying a Bible. "Samantha gave it to me," he explained. "She told me about this God called Jesus, and I thought, *He is good. I want to follow Him.*"

Like Philip, Samantha offered friendship that led to the best of all life changes for her friend. God is ready and willing to orchestrate encounters for us like He did for Samantha and Philip. Let's be ready for them.

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