

Connecting with People / Connecting with God

Tammy: There was once a rich man who lived in a beautiful mansion. It had everything he could possibly want. There were wonderful paintings, and music played in every room. His bed was always soft and clean. His meals were always delicious. He didn't need to work. He had a gymnasium to keep fit, and a home theatre to amuse him. There were lovely gardens around the house, and a high wall to keep out intruders. Do you envy him?... What if I tell you that he lived there all alone, and never spoke to anyone at all?

Carol: Oh, that makes a big difference- I don't think I envy him after all! Do you? Hello, I'm Carol, and we're joining you with Women of Hope.

Tammy: And hello from me- it's Tammy here. Fran's with us today too- our counselor friend. Would you like to be that rich man, Fran?

Fran: No, I wouldn't- I'd rather be here talking to my friends. I've talked to lots of unhappy people and I've discovered one thing that people really need. We need connections- real relationships with other people. But so many people are lonely, and unhappy.

Carol: How do we learn to make friends?

Fran: I think most of us learn it in our homes. Parents smile and talk to their baby, long before the baby understands. A parent usually feels very close to their baby and the baby quickly connects- we call it bonding. Occasionally that doesn't happen and the parents need to spend extra time talking, cuddling, and smiling, to make the connection stronger.

Tammy: I think we reward babies for smiling- I remember the joy I felt when my baby first smiled. We got so *excited*...and we smiled and talked back to him. He must have learnt that smiles are good!

Fran: Yes, I agree...the baby learns to watch your face to see how you're feeling too. And I'm sure as your children grew up Tammy, you taught them how to get on well with people, by your example. You listened...you showed them affection.

It's even good for children to see that their parents can be angry, if they still treat each other with respect. It's so important to learn that people can disagree and still love each other, and stay connected.

Carol: Fran, I know some people have a disorder that stops them connecting with other people. Can you tell us something about that?

Fran: I think you mean *Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

Carol: That's right.

Fran: There are different kinds of Autism, and there are medical doctors who specialize in treating them. They are caused by problems with the development of the nervous system. But you're right, children or adults with Autism find it hard to connect with others. They may be very passive quiet babies, or extremely active and loud, but they don't pick up the normal clues about how people are feeling, and how to act with other people. Some people are only mildly affected and it might not be diagnosed, but they have difficulty relating to other people even though they might be very intelligent.

It's possible to teach some of these relating skills. You might have to explain what a smile means, or how to tell if someone is afraid or angry. People with this disorder need to learn and practise these skills...to talk with someone about what emotions mean, and how they should behave in social situations. For example, they might need to practise looking at someone's face when they're talking. Their families need to understand that they have a real medical problem; they're not just being difficult. It's important not to lose your temper with them- they won't understand, and they'll get more and more upset and out of control. You have to be very patient to live with a child, or an adult, with autism, but love and patience can make a big difference. If you think your child might have an autism disorder, do go to see a doctor or your health care worker who can help you to know what to do.

Tammy: How do *you* make friends? I think I've made most of my friendships through school, church or work, and those friendships just seemed to grow.

Fran: Well, that's a good clue - we often make friends because we are both interested in the same things. You don't usually make friends by staying at home, you need to go out and do things that interest you. But when you meet new people, you need to show that you are interested in them too. You can ask them questions; maybe about what they enjoy doing. Don't start off with very personal questions! Think: what makes you feel that someone likes you?

Carol: If someone looks me in the eye... and seem to be interested in what I say.

Tammy: If they say nice things about what I'm doing...

Carol: ... or wearing. And if they like the same things that I like.

Fran: So friendship might start with shared experiences, like having children the same age. But to be a good friend, listen, ask questions, show you understand their feelings, help them with problems, and support them.

Carol: I guess it's important to value your friend and give them time and attention. And to share your life too, so the friendship goes both ways.

Fran: There's an old saying: 'To make a friend, you have to be friendly'. That's not just smiling and saying nice things. It's taking a real interest in another person for *their* sake, not just for what *you* can get out of it. That's how real friendships grow.

Carol: Welcome back to Women of Hope. Have you ever eaten an Easter egg? In my country, Easter eggs are usually made of chocolate and wrapped up in shiny coloured foil. In Europe they often use hard-boiled eggs, decorated with traditional patterns. But I'm afraid that many people have forgotten what the festival of Easter is really about, or maybe they never knew. So today we want to tell you the real story of Easter, straight from God's word, the Bible. Maybe you've heard it before...then try to listen as though it's new, as though you don't know what's going to happen? If you've never heard it before, listen carefully. It's probably the most important story in the world, and it's true.

On Women of Hope we often talk about Jesus Christ. Jesus lived on earth about 2000 years ago. He taught people about God, and healed sick people, and did some amazing things, and his followers were sure that he was the promised Messiah. They thought he would become a great ruler and rescue them from the Romans who occupied their land. But things turned out rather differently. Let's listen as Tammy tells us the story from the Bible.

Tammy: It was festival time in the city of Jerusalem. The local authorities were looking for a way to get rid of Jesus - they were afraid that he would gather followers during the festival, and cause a revolution.

Judas was one of Jesus' friends, but he betrayed Jesus to the local authorities, for money. They arrested Jesus at night when the crowds weren't there. (Luke 22:1-5)

The leading priests and the elders of the people tried to find some evidence against Jesus, but they couldn't find anything... At last the High Priest asked him directly, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed God?' Jesus answered 'I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated on the right of Almighty God and coming with the clouds of heaven!' The elders said this was blasphemy, and they were determined that Jesus must die. (Mark 14:55-64)

Next morning Jesus was brought before the Roman governor, Pilate... Pilate didn't want to execute him - he could see that Jesus had done nothing wrong. But a mob gathered, shouting and threatening, and in the end Pilate gave in to them...and condemned Jesus to death. (John Ch 18-19)

The soldiers beat Jesus severely. They pushed a crown of thorns onto his head, wrapped a purple robe around him, pretending he was a king. (Mark 15:16-20) Then they made him carry a heavy wooden cross outside the city. There they *nailed* his hands and feet to the cross and stood it upright in the ground, and waited for Jesus to die (Jn 19:17-18). This was crucifixion, the cruel way they executed criminals. Jesus suffered there for hours, and at last he cried out, 'It is finished'. He bowed his head and gave up his spirit to God his Father. (Jn 19:30) The soldiers made sure he was truly dead by piercing his side with a spear. His followers went home, weeping.

Carol: How do you feel when you hear this story? Sad? Angry? Confused? Imagine how Jesus' friends felt. They had such high hopes, and now their leader, their loved friend, was dead. I think they forgot what Jesus had told them- that he must die, that he would give his life...to rescue them from sin (Mark 10:45).

And they forgot something else he had said too. Let's hear what happened next (Luke 24).

Tammy: Jesus' body was put into a tomb cut in the rock, blocked with a huge stone, and guarded by soldiers.

Very early on the third day, some of his friends...the women...went to the tomb with sweet spices to anoint Jesus' body. They were puzzled to find that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance, and when they looked inside, the tomb was ... empty!

Suddenly two men in bright shining clothes appeared. They said, 'Why are you looking among the dead for one who is alive? He is not here...he is risen from the dead. Remember what he said to you that he must be handed over to sinful men, be crucified, and three days later rise to life?' Then the women remembered that Jesus had said this. They rushed home to tell the others; they could hardly believe it.

Over the next few days Jesus showed himself to groups of his friends, until they had all seen him alive again. They could touch him, talk to him, eat with him...he was real flesh and blood, but he could also appear and disappear at times. They knew for sure that he was alive, but things were different. He wasn't just their friend. Now they worshipped him in awe.

Jesus explained again to them that all nations must hear the message, to turn from their sins and receive God's forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. He would send his Holy Spirit to give them the power to do this job.

And then Jesus left them: he was taken up into heaven while they watched. But this time there was no mourning- they were filled with joy. They were so sure of what they had seen and heard, that from then on they risked their lives, to spread the news about Jesus.

Carol: So that's the real story of Easter. Those Easter eggs are symbols of new life- they just remind us that God brought his Son, Jesus, back to life, and that he wants to give us new spiritual life too, when we believe in him.

Fran: Some women have asked me, 'How can I know God? How can I really connect with him?' Are *you* asking those sorts of questions? My friend, I want to talk just with you today, on Women of Hope about how *you* can connect with God.

First I must ask you; are you really *willing* to connect with God? The *real* personal, holy, loving, powerful God, not just the God we imagine? Because you know, he will ask you for your whole self. Are you genuine?...

You think you are? Good! Then think about this- if God is there, and he made you, you are *already* connected in some ways. He's there, waiting for you...

He's real, he's God, and he wants to connect with you. How do you know this? In the Bible it says, 'whoever wants to draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.' (Heb 11:6)

Are you sincere and honest about yourself? Can you admit that you're not pure and holy like God?...that you actually need him? That you might need to let him make changes in your life? This won't be a meeting of friends who are equals. You have to start very humbly...he will be in charge, not you.

Remember what we said before about connecting with another person? You talk, you listen, you spend time together. Let's start there. Maybe a humble person would listen first- so will you invite God to speak to you? There's a prayer in the Bible that says, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.' (1 Samuel 3:10) That might be a good place to start.

There are a few ways you can listen. What ways have you thought of?

Maybe you hear God through the order and beauty of the universe and nature, or through art or music...

Maybe new thoughts come into your head, or unexpected things happen that make you feel God is trying to get your attention...

Someone shows you love, or something wonderful happens, and you think: 'I need to say thank you to God.'

Or you might find that you feel guilty about something...you realize that you can't even meet your own standards. Are you open to these things...listening for God's voice?

The Bible, God's holy book, is the clearest way God talks to us. It tells us how people have connected to God over thousands of years. But the Bible claims to be more than that...to be God explaining himself to humanity, through the words of many different people over many centuries. It says God is perfectly good and holy, so he is always hurt and offended by our wrong choices. But it also shows that God loves us- loves you- perfectly, passionately, and he'll do anything to fix the broken connection.

So how could God fix that broken connection with those he has created? Maybe by becoming one of us? The Bible says that's just what happened; Jesus was God who came as a real human, to show us what God is like, and to be one with us.

His story is in the Bible, so that's another great reason to read it. As you get to know *Jesus*, you'll find out what God is like, and how to connect with him. You'll find a remarkable thing: that Jesus was morally perfect...sinless, yet he died to take our punishment, to pay the moral debt we owed God, so we can be close to him.

So we can *listen* to God... How can we *talk* to God?... Just the same way as in our ordinary, good, relationships... Sometimes we say 'I love you' or thanks; sometimes we just chat about our life with someone who cares... Sometimes we need to say sorry, and ask for forgiveness don't we? We can talk with God in just the same way.

Sometimes we ask 'why?' Or we ask for help...

All of these happen in our relationship with God. We listen to his word and think about his truths. We pray to him and tell him how we feel or ask him for help. And sometimes we can just be together, without words, but we know that he's there.

If you really want to have this relationship you must start with a humble heart. Admit to God that you cannot reach his standards. Then thank him for sending Jesus, who died to take away all the results of your failures and sins. You must accept his love and forgiveness as a gift...it's free! The Bible says that 'if we confess our sins, God is true to his promise and will do what is right: he will forgive all our sins and wash us clean from everything wrong.' (1 John 1:9) That starts a whole new relationship- it's like being born again as God's own child. Then you can really start connecting – you can have a lively, loving conversation with God that goes on forever.

Where do you think you are in your relationship with this loving God?... Where would you like to be?... What do you need to do next?... How can we help you?

Tammy: Thank you Fran. Those are important questions. Maybe you know someone who follows Jesus and you could talk to them, or maybe you could find a church or group of Christians. You could write to us perhaps, and we could send you something to read that would help you. We'd love to hear what you're thinking about these big questions.

Carol: It's time for us to go. I hope you'll go on thinking about making friends... and how God wants to be friends with you. Goodbye, and God bless you.

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