

Sharing the Light: The Light of Friendship

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1 Samuel 18:1-5

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved. (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up today to whatever it is you have for each one of us. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words, that we might be directed to the living word, Jesus Christ. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen*

This is one of the most profound and poignant and beautiful stories I think in all the Old Testament. It's the story of David and Jonathan, and theirs is a Biblical model of friendship. What I'd like to do is tell the story because it spans many different chapters so we can have the whole picture of who David and Jonathan were.

So, you remember that David went into Saul's service. He began as playing the lyre, then was his armor-bearer and was taken into Saul's house, into his household. Jonathan was Saul's son, and so you have Jonathan and David living in Saul's household - sort of like brothers. Not exactly, but sort of like brothers. And then what happened was when David was able to kill Goliath the Philistine, then something happened. At first, Saul was so pleased, but then as they were marching back home again, the crowds gathered, and they began to cheer more vehemently for David than for Saul. And this Scripture says that this evil spirit - the spirit of jealousy - just rose up inside of Saul, and he began to hate David.

In the meantime, Jonathan had developed this friendship with David, and he saw his father's crazy actions. Three times after they've joined together in this marvelous friendship - three times, he intercedes with his father in one way or another for David. The first time Saul has decided to kill David and Jonathan comes and simply intercedes for him. He says, "Why would you want to kill him? He won the battle with the Philistine for you. And he's doing all this to support your army and your household. Why would you want to do anything to harm him?" And at first, Saul thought, "That makes sense." But then again, that spirit of jealousy was just hard to knock down, and it came welling back up within him again, and he took his spear and threw it at David to try and kill him. So, David left.

The second time David has now been brought back into Saul's household, but he's not sure that he's going to be safe. He says, to Jonathan, "Jonathan, I really need you to watch for me. I need you to let me know what's going on." And soon, David discovers that Saul is planning to kill him. They hatch this elaborate plan for David to escape. David escapes from the house of Saul, and they pledge their loyalty, friendship, and love to one another forever and ever at that point. And they think that may be the last time they see each other.

A number of years later, David is in the wilderness of Ziph, and he's been traveling, formed his own army now, but Saul's still after him to kill him. He's spared Saul's life several times already himself. And Saul is after him to kill him. And Jonathan finds out that Saul has discovered where David is, and he goes ahead and says, "You need to be careful because my father's coming after you to kill you, and you need to know that he's coming." They again renew their covenant with one another, they pledge their loyalty to one another, and they never see each other again.

In 1 Samuel 31, Jonathan and Saul die in battle on Mt. Gilboa. There is some confusion about how they die. The Scripture says that Jonathan died in battle, and Saul either took his own life or encouraged an Amalekite to kill him so he wouldn't be killed in battle. But either way, when David found out about Jonathan's and Saul's death, his heart was broken, and he wept. He wrote a song called the Song of the Bow in which he talked about Saul, the one he'd had this relationship with. That Saul was always after him, but he loved Saul still. And he especially loved Jonathan to whom he'd pledged his friendship, love, and loyalty. It's just a beautiful story.

The Bible uses Jonathan and David as sort of a model for what Biblical friendship should look like. We're in this series on "Sharing the Light" and what I want us to think about is how we might share the light of friendship with others around us, how we might be instruments of God to offer that kind of Biblical friendship into the lives of others.

Let's look at the passage and see what we can learn from it. There are four things I want to lift up, and the first is this - that David needed a friend. That's as simple and straightforward as it could be, but he had allies, supporters, cheerleaders, acquaintances, and advocates, but what he needed was a friend. He needed somebody he could count on and really trust, and Jonathan stepped into that role. And he made it the case that he was going to make sure that that happened.

We are in a culture, a world where people need friends. It's interesting how friendship has changed in some way so much over the years.

There was a documentary that came out not long ago in the United Kingdom called "The Age of Loneliness." You've probably heard about the "Age of Anxiety"? Well, this is a documentary about "The Age of Loneliness." It documented so many different kinds of statistics.

Here's what Sue Bourne found out. She found that only 20% of people live in the same town they grew up in, and on average, in the U.S., people move 11.7 times in their lives. Now think about that. There was a day when you were born in a town, and you built friendships and relationships; those friendships continued throughout your life because you always lived in the same town. But now you may move 11.7 times - and that may be into different houses in the same town. Nonetheless, in our mobile society, there aren't many people who stay in the same town they were born in all of their lives.

Think about it in terms of your friends at work. At work, we used to maybe work for the same company our whole lives. Perhaps just two or three different jobs, but now the evidence is that millennials will change jobs every three years. Think about that. You build friendships at work, and then you have to move and go build up new friendships. You get a new job, and you have to build up friendships again. And the difficulty in building these lasting friendships continues.

Then you get to the end of your career, and you retire. All the friendships you made at work now are gone. They're not gone, but you do not see them every day. It's just a difficult time for us to keep and build those friendships. And the truth is we were made for those kinds of relationships. We were created to be in relationship. Think about it - the first nine months you're

in someone's womb, and you hear a heartbeat every day - your mother's heartbeat. You're fused with another human being. Then when you're born, you're completely dependent on another human being. We were created to be in relationship.

In Genesis, God creates the world, and at the end of each day, the Scripture says, "And it was good," and "It was very good" at the end. Then in chapter two of Genesis, we have the first thing where it says, "And it was not good." And the Scripture says, "It was not good that the man should be alone." Then he creates the woman. As one pastor said, "The new and improved version of the man - humanity 2.0." We think of that usually as a passage about being married or having a spouse. The truth is it's a much broader concept than that. It's now the creation of another human being and the ability to be in relationship. We were made for that relationship. And there are people all around us who live in this kind of loneliness which are hungry for authentic real friendships.

Albert Einstein was a brilliant physicist and scientist, and at the height of his fame, he said, "It is strange to be known so universally and yet to be so lonely." Look at all the lonely people, as the Beatles song says. David needed a friend and so do others.

Now the second thing we can learn is that Jonathan created or made, forged, that friendship through his sacrifice and his effort. Sometimes we think that real friendships just sort of magically happen. And that may be true - even in this case, it appears that Jonathan was just struck by David, and this chemistry was there. We think that's what happens with friendships. And I think it might begin that way. But Jonathan didn't let it stop there, and he pushed it, he forged it, he gave his effort to it. For friendships to really happen, they take time, and they take effort, they take sacrifice.

What are some of the things we have to sacrifice and give to be willing to be friends? First, there's the sacrifice of time because it takes time to be a friend. Pastor Rick Warren said, "You know when someone tells you that they're sorry they can't be at your event or be with you, but I'll be with you in spirit, do you know what that means? It means nothing." That's because it takes a sacrifice of time to build a friendship. I've had people say to me, "I just don't have time for friends. I have family, and I have work, and I just don't have time for friendships." Well, then you just don't have enough time, period. Because you don't have time for one of those things that make life fulfilling and real and powerful, and it is one of the most significant ways in which

we're able to influence or share the light of Christ with others. And that's through the gift of friendships.

It takes a sacrifice of the heart. Maybe that's the biggest one that gets us. Think of what Jonathan gave up - this difficult relationship with his father was difficult because of David. At least it was partly because of David. This relationship of someone he cared about and then would be apart from them for a long time. It was a sacrifice of the heart. What happens is a lot of times we don't want to take that risk. We think to ourselves, "What if I don't like them after a while? What if they get needy and they want to be friends all the time, and I don't really like being around them? Or what if they don't like me? What if I set out to be friends with them, and they don't like me?"

Or maybe we've been hurt before in friendships, we've given ourselves entirely to friendships and maybe felt betrayed, and something happened. Or maybe you had close friends, and they passed away. That's what happened here with Jonathan. And you think to yourself, "It's just not worth it. I'm not going to give that sacrifice of the heart to make friends."

And then you might even think to yourself, "You know what, I have plenty of friends, so why should I give that kind of energy, that kind of time or sacrifice when the friends I already have in my life are fulfilling, and they mean a lot to me? I have healthy friendships."

Well, maybe it's not about you. Perhaps we, as followers of Jesus, are called to carry that friendship into the lives of others. Perhaps it's about the fact that there are so many people who are struggling with loneliness, who are hungry for someone to reach into their lives and to be a friend.

He was willing to do the work, to expend the effort.

Here's the third thing I see here. Jonathan sustained that friendship against all odds. He continued to renew the covenant that he had made with David. As the years went by, neither one of them forgot the other.

In 1 Samuel 23, they're in the wilderness of Ziph, and the Scripture says, "The two of them made a covenant before the Lord. And Jonathan went home, but David remained in Horesh."

So, they're near the end of their life, and they renew their covenant. They stay committed to one another, even though there has been this distance and this time between them. Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times." I looked up that word *all* in Hebrew and it means *all times*. When it doesn't say, "A friend doesn't love most of the time." It says, "A brother is born

for adversity,” so a brother shows up just when the going’s tough but the rest of the time, you just ignore them. But a friend loves all times, good times and in bad times. They’re with you. Even when we’re apart for a time, they can deeply care about you.

I went to see a friend last week. We’ve been friends for over a quarter of a century. And he’s very sick now and is in hospice care at home. We had a great visit. We talked for over an hour before he just got tired. You know, we don’t talk all that often. We may go a year without being in conversation, but in that room, the friendship was just as alive and beautiful as ever. We laughed about things we’d done together, and about things he’d done for me and something I’d done for him. We just talked about life and family and all the things that matter to us. And I just thought to myself, “What a beautiful friendship to be able to withstand the distance and time to be together still.” I think there’s something in the Bible about it, and it’s called love. Something deeply spiritual that binds two people together in covenant with one another.

I have another friend who’s just relentless in his pursuit of maintaining our friendship. He continues to reach out. He sends me emails about a sermon I’ve preached, or something he’s read, makes lunch appointments so we can go to lunch. He just has decided that this is an important friendship and will invest himself in maintaining it. And I’m so grateful. I know I don’t reciprocate in the way I should, but I’m so grateful for that willingness to maintain a friendship, a connection that matters.

Fredrick Buechner is one of my favorite authors, and he writes about Jonathan and David in his book called *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*. He writes: “What was important about their relationship was its affection, respect, and faithfulness. That kept it alive through thick and thin until finally Jonathan was killed in battle. David rent his garments and wept over him.” That willingness, the power of that friendship to persevere.

Here’s the basic message, the summary of today’s sermon. It’s “Make new friends and keep the old. One is silver and the other gold.” Old Girl Scout song I believe. We need to decide to invest ourselves and make new friends and make new friendships with others. And then value and invest in and hold fast to the friendships we already have.

Here’s the fourth thing. Jonathan understood and brought God into their friendship. Now it may seem like it’s just a figure of speech, but I want you to listen to what the promise was that they made to each other as David left the household of Saul when he escaped. It says, “Both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, ‘The Lord shall be between you and me, and

between my descendants and your descendants, forever.” (1 Samuel 20:42) that the presence of God will bind us together.

One of the most important things we can do in friendship is bring the presence of God into the midst of it. It's to carry into the lives of others the presence of a friend who will never abandon you, who will never forget them, who will be with them no matter what. To bring through this portal that we call friendship to pass a relationship with Christ into that person's life, so they'll have a friend no matter what.

John Peyton was a missionary in the Pacific Islands, and when he went there many years ago, the conditions were incredibly harsh. His wife went with him, and she died there three months later, and he had to bury her there. Here's what he writes about that: “If it had not been for Christ and his friendship, I should have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave. I had the friendship of Christ that would see me through.”

Maybe you know who Sam Johnson was - he was a Congressman from the Dallas area, and he died in May of this year. He wrote a book called *Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW's Story*, which was his autobiography. He'd served both in Korea and Vietnam but had been a POW in the Vietnam Wartime. He was held captive for seven and a half years. And for many of those years, he was in solitary confinement. He said, “I didn't know if anybody was around. They'd give me food, but I spoke to no one. It's a terrible kind of torture. I thought about my family, about them, and whether they were still alive or what was going on. But what sustained me most was my friendship with Christ. It was knowing the presence of God was with me all the time. I was never really alone because I always knew that Christ was with me.”

For us to be able through our friendship with someone else offer them that kind of friendship. I've told you before about Mark Graham, and I'm always grateful to him. He's a pastor now in Illinois, and he was the one who, when I was in high school, invited me to go on a youth retreat and then led me to Christ. And we became close friends, but it was through that friendship that Christ became real to me. It was through that friendship that I was given a friendship that would last beyond my friendship with Mark. Because he introduced me, it was through his witness and through our friendship. I like to say that the way the Gospel is passed is through the portal of hearts joined together in friendship. He gave me that gift, and I'll forever be grateful for that gift. To bring Christ into a relationship as part of friendship can mean more than you can imagine.

So, we make new friends and keep the old - one is silver and the other gold.

I'm going to close with this. I do memorial services where I preside and lead them, and I meet with the families ahead of time. It's always a really powerful thing. I don't know if you ever think to yourself, "Who's going to be a pallbearer at my funeral? Who's going to speak at my memorial service? Do I have people who would speak at my service?" Think about that.

I've thought about it. Sometimes I meet with the families, and I'll ask if they'll have someone else speak. About half of the people will have someone speak. It might be a family member or friend. But every once in a while, someone will say, "Yes," And they show me a list of maybe 27 people they want to have speak. I think that's hyperbole - I don't think there's ever been that many.

I'll say, "You don't really need to have 27 people speak." And I really encourage them to whittle down the number so it's manageable timewise. But what I realize is that for many of these people, they've spent a lifetime making new friends and keeping the old ones—sustaining friendships that are life-changing for them and the other person. And these are people who want to respond to that friendship that's been built. When we choose to make new friends and keep the old, when we invest in those friendships, our joys are doubled because we have someone to share with them. And our sorrows are halved because we have someone to help carry them.

There's someone in your orbit who needs a friend. It may be that they've had other friends betray them, and they're lonesome. It may be that they never had very many friends. It may be that they have a loved one who's passed away, and those nights are long and lonely. But someone in your orbit needs a friend. And we can share with them into that darkness, into that loneliness the light of friendship.

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, we thank you so much for the friends that you've brought into our lives and for the way that they offer us a light in our darkness, that they brighten our world. God, there are people around us who need that gift of friendship and so challenge us to move out of our comfort zone to invest ourselves, our time, our energy, our hearts in other people. That through that friendship, they might see you and experience your presence that friendship that will never go away. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*