

“When Friends Fail”

28 October 2018: 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas

Preaching Text: Job 42:1-6, 10-17

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“He hasn’t an enemy in the world - but all his friends hate him”

—Eddie Cantor (1892 - 1964)

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We might say that today’s lesson pertains to how God rightly views Job’s so-called friends. If we read the text carefully, we note that although Job’s friends appear to be emotionally supportive, they soon attack Job theologically. These friends try to put Job in the wrong which directly violates the text’s argument that Job was “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3). Essentially, God sees that these friends had effectively abandoned Job in his time of need (Job 42:7-9). In fact, we all have abandonment issues.

For a trivial example, a friend and I were taking his college girlfriend Sandy to the airport to fly home for Christmas. But Sandy had an unusual request—to visit her friend’s wedding reception at the posh Dallas Country Club. We were not expressly dressed for such, but after Sandy’s kvetching and pleading, we gave in. Awkwardly for me, as we were standing against a wall, Sandy banged into a heaping tray of empty crystal glasses and fine china. She quickly vacated the premises while I stood like a statue. The overly-stacked tray crashed—every piece of crockery broke. Conversations ceased and even the band stopped playing! Everyone stared right at me—and I realized in an instant the title of this sermon: “When Friends Fail.” I was all alone and looking quite guilty. There are times when all of us know or at least feel the sting of being completely alone.

Job lost his wealth, family, and his friends would have done him a favor if they had cut him loose. Outwardly even Yahweh forsook Job. Psalm 22 sums up Job’s plaintive cries: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” Hear the day’s lesson:

1 Then Job answered the Lord:

2 “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 3 ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 4 ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’ 5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; 6 therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

10 And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. 11 Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. 12 The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.

13 He also had seven sons and three daughters. 14 He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. 15 In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. 16 After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. 17 And Job died, old and full of days (Job 42:1-6, 10-17).

I heard a speech about friends once at Kairos prison ministry weekend. Friends show care for us in many ways. Yet why do people we hardly know—or do not know at all—do selfless things on our behalf? We say: “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” So why would people go out of their way to do kind and loving things for others unless there is a catch? What is up with these folks we might wonder? Would they still act kindly if they knew us—or me? These are honest questions. We want to know if these folks would be our friends if they really knew us the way we are. We all need a friend—no one would disagree, but what is exactly a friend.

Sometimes we think a friend is someone who will always take our side in an argument or someone who always agrees with what we say or think. Yet, the truth is that often our best friends are ones who keep us from doing something hurtful to ourselves or other people. Above all a friend is honest with us. A friend is someone who wants the best for us and from us. A friend is a person who is willing to invest his/her life in our life. A friend is willing to let us make our own decisions, even when our decisions may be mistaken or cause us pain. And yet a true friend will be there for us despite whatever mistakes or bad decisions we make. Honest friends will tell us where and when we are wrong, and they will be there to pick up the pieces after we have made a bad decision. True friends are those who stick with us in good times and in bad. Often, we hear about “fair weather friends”—folks who are friendly toward us when everything goes well. But honest and true friends stay with us even when the going gets tough—especially when the going is the toughest!

According to **Maimonides** (a scholarly Medieval Rabbi) each of Job's friends represents a different theological position regarding divine providence. In other words, they were not as interested in Job as in defending their theology respecting human suffering—Job's suffering. **Eliphaz** typifies a biblical/rabbinic tradition—God punishes Job for his sins; **Bildad** states that Job's testing offers a greater reward; **Zophar** suggests Job suffers because of God's arbitrary will. **Elihu** simply restates earlier claims. His agenda is the same as the friends: first convince Job that he has done something deserving of punishment, then encourage Job to repent to receive restored divine blessing. Elihu introduces a new principle—“bribes are wrong” (Job 36:18)—a fabricated allegation against Job. We can see Yahweh's view on the failing of Job's friends in Job 42:7-9 deleted from our morning's reading:

7 The LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. 8 Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.” 9 So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

We note that at the end, Yahweh stuck by Job all through one malady after another. We may not be fond of the story, but at the end God is there. I am deeply convinced that God wants to be our friend.

There are many examples of how God befriends God's people. A fundamental example is God's covenant with the Hebrews. God's covenant of friendship reveals God's love. God also sent Jesus for this purpose. Through Jesus, God offers God's friendship for all people everywhere.

Let me tell you a story about how I became a friend of God, if you will permit me an indulgence. When I was in grade school, my mother was always sick. She would regularly go to bed with migraine headaches for days. Later, my siblings and I learned that our mother had a serious alcohol problem. Yet, in the fifth grade having someone tell you your mother is sick is enough information. My father was a doctor and left every morning at 6:00, usually returning after we all in bed. Regularly I might go a week or more without seeing my father. He so disliked conflict that he neglected to come home. In time, my brother and sister and I started going to a little church nearby. There, kindly people befriended us. Without functioning parents, those church people became parents and friends for my brother, sister, and me. Their friendship probably saved me. I am still indebted to that little church all these many years later.

The little church down the street taught me how to be a friend to others and to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It was the most precious gift anyone ever gave me.

We begin our stewardship education program next Sunday. One of our important biblical lessons concerns tithing. Tithing, giving ten percent, comes as faith standard about how we manage gifts that God has first given us. Tithing trusts God's power to keep blessing us.

We give expressly because we trust God will take care of us. After all God wants to be our friend. Yet, tithing is a spiritual lesson we cannot experience without taking the first step. As we step closer to trusting in God's faithfulness and trying to be a friend of God's, we experience greater and greater faith. Sometimes we just need a nudge.

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