Spiritual Friends

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The Christian life is not a solitary enterprise. We need spiritual friends.

There are 67 billion Facebook Friends in the world today. So why isn’t the world a friendlier place?

A judge has made it official. Being Facebook Friends with people doesn’t necessarily make them your friends. This British magistrate presided over a harassment case in which a woman accused her former boyfriend of hounding her by repeatedly sending her a “friend request” on Facebook. The ex-boyfriend was cleared of all charges. The judge ruled that his contact was highly innocuous because being Facebook friends could not be defined as “friendship in the traditional sense.”

There is a cognitive limit to the number of people with whom we can maintain stable social relationships. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar pegs the number at 150. This number, called “Dunbar’s number,” calculates that we can maintain a meaningful relationship with about 150 people. If you’re in excess of 150 friends on Facebook, chances are you’ve got acquaintances, not friends.

The average young adult has 237 Facebook Friends. But when these young adults, ages 18-35, are asked whom they would turn to for support, the number drops to two people. Two people out of 237 can be counted on for any real support.

This sermon is about friendship. The Christian life is not a solitary enterprise. We need spiritual friends.

We’re in the midst of a 12-Sunday sermon series on the life of David. Two Sundays ago, we examined David’s anointing as king in 1 Samuel 16. Last Sunday, we explored the epic story of David’s improbable victory over Goliath, in 1 Samuel 17. So far, so good! David has been anointed king and proven successful in battle. He has become everybody’s hero. The people love him, including King Saul’s family. Even Saul’s servants have taken a liking to David.

Our story is about to become really messy. King Saul becomes insanely jealous of David’s popularity. Yet, Saul’s daughter is married to David, which makes David his son-in-law. Saul’s son Jonathan is also friends with David. They ought to be rivals. Instead, they become best friends.

Our story has all the elements of a compelling soap opera with Saul and David on one side and David and Saul’s family on the other side. Yet, in the midst of this mess, is the forging of a lasting friendship.
There is great power in friendship to endure a crisis.

We pick up the story in chapter 20. David knows Saul is out to kill him. He has already tried to pin David to the wall with a spear on three occasions. Twice, Saul proposed David’s marriage to his daughters as a pretext to get him killed in battle. Once he goes so far as hire a hit squad to take out his rival.

When David voices his fears, Jonathan asks his friend, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jonathan has already conceded his right to the royal throne. Now, he’s willing to endure his father’s wrath for the sake of his friend.

David proposes a scheme to expose Saul’s intentions. David will intentionally miss a royal dinner. When Saul observes David as a no-show, he will either accept David’s excuse or fly into a jealous rage.

Jonathan agrees to participate in the plan. As they part, David and Jonathan reaffirm their covenant of friendship (20:16, cf. 18:3). The narrator tells us that “David loved Jonathan as he loved himself” (20:17) or, literally, as he loved his own soul. They are soul mates; kindred spirits, if you will. What a testimony to the bond of friendship.

At the banquet where David is conveniently absent, Saul asks about David’s whereabouts. When Jonathan offers the prearranged excuse, Saul goes off like a rocket. He’s convinced Jonathan has joined the conspiracy, so he throws a spear at his own flesh and blood. There’s little doubt about Saul’s intentions now. If he’s willing to kill his own son, he won’t give a second thought to eliminating David.

Jonathan carries the fateful news back to David. Both sense that David is destined to live as a fugitive. Their friendship is now imperiled. The narrator reports that “they kiss each other and weep together—but David wept the most” (20:41). There are people who want to make their relationship into something erotic, but there is no evidence that their friendship is anything but Platonic. “Go in peace,” Jonathan says, “since both of us have sworn friendship to each other in the name of the Lord” (20:42). There is power in their friendship to avert this crisis.

Let me take you back to something I said earlier in sermons. David, for all his virtues, is not the real hero here. God is the hero. God is like a friend to David. We’re told at our story’s outset, “The Lord is with David” (18:12, 14). Even Saul comes to begrudgingly acknowledge that “the Lord is with David” (18:28).

David and Jonathan’s friendship has three critical components. First, they are loyal to each other. Consider this friendship from Jonathan’s point of view. Jonathan cultivates his friendship with David at considerable risk to himself.
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He gives up his legal right to the throne and risks a backlash from his father for the sake of his friend.

Second, they are honest with each other. There is no posturing or subterfuge in this story. They don’t waste time guarding their thoughts or carefully parsing their words with each other. They speak honestly and plainly with each other.

Third, they bring out the best in each other. Their friendship raises the bar on issues of faith and character. They draw each other closer to God.

Friendship is a neglected spiritual practice in the church today. Jesus said to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants…Instead, I call you friends” (John 15:15). Friends serve, in the Bible, as a synonym for believers (3 John 14). We are friends who share the bond of Christ. We belong to one another. The Quakers are onto something when they identify their community as a society of friends. Would that we would become a community of spiritual friends!

We have at our disposal, in church history, a rich repository of spiritual friendship. St. Augustine, in the 4th century, called friendship “a school for Christian discipleship.” He said that we need spiritual friends to guide us toward the goal of shared discipleship. Augustine’s contemporary, St. Ambrose, wrote a treatise differentiating friendship from mere acquaintances. Acquaintances tend to conceal our real motives, present a convenient image of ourselves and use language as a disguise. Friends, however, are willing to put aside convention and hide nothing. A friend seeks to express ourselves “as we are and not as we would have our friend think us to be.”

We need loyal friends. I’m not talking about making friends for the purpose of getting ahead. I’m talking about people who have your back and support you no matter what. Consider the Proverb, “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (18:4).

We need honest friends. We read in Proverbs, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (27:6). Aristotle said, “A friend is a second self.” He also said, “A true friend is like a mirror.” True friends show us our true selves. They tell us the truth. They don’t feign niceness. Friendship isn’t only saccharine sweetness. I’m reminded of the Sicilian proverb, “A friend tells you when your face is dirty.” It’s the kind of people who tell you when you have parsley stuck between your teeth.

We need friends who draw us close to Christ. Again, we read in Proverbs, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (27:17). Spiritual friends don’t talk incessantly about spiritual things. They can hang with us in talking about most anything. Yet, they’re the only people
Spiritual friends are channels of God’s grace. They are, in the words of St. Augustine, a primary way in which God loves and supports us.

I must be careful here not to idealize friendship. Every friend is flawed, just as we are flawed. So friendships, like all other relationships, will take hard work and determination to push through interpersonal struggle and tension. Some friendships will hurt you deeply. It goes with the territory.

Women, generally speaking, are far more adept at making and maintaining friendships. Most men are essentially friendless. Men, ask yourselves, whom can I turn to in a time of crisis? If you’re coming up empty, maybe you need to become more intentional about cultivating spiritual friends.

I’ll be talking tomorrow night at our Men’s Group about how men and women make friends differently. Most women are highly proficient at cultivating face to face relationships. Women know instinctively how to talk together, cry together and laugh together. Men are better at fostering side by side relationships. Men prefer to do things together—to play golf together or go to a game together.

We’re only three Sundays into this David series, but I’m already noticing something. There are no miracles in David’s story—no parting of the Red Sea, no healings or raisings from the dead. We are repeatedly told “the Lord is with David.” God doesn’t work outside of the normal channels in David’s life. God works in David’s everyday life. One of the ways God is powerfully at work in this story is through David and Jonathan’s friendship.

Our goal this fall is to more intentionally become a community of spiritual friends. I’m inviting you to cultivate spiritual friends in this church. “I no longer call you servants,” Jesus said. “I call you friends.”