

I Samuel 20:35-42
Philippians 2:19-30

Faithful Friends
Pastor Dennis Plourde

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Charles Swindoll writes, "If I have learned anything during my journey on Planet Earth, it is that people need one another. The presence of other people is essential—caring people, helpful people, interesting people, friendly people, thoughtful people. These folk take the grind out of life. About the time we are tempted to think we can handle all things alone—boom! We run into some obstacle and need assistance. We discover all over again that we are not nearly as self-sufficient as we thought."

Where would we be without faithful friends? Today our Scripture lessons speak of three (four) faithful friends. The first two we find in I Samuel, David and Jonathan. One, Jonathan, is the eldest son of the first King of Israel and is destined to become Israel's second King. However, because of the actions of his father, another of Saul's line will never be King. God has chosen David to become the second King of Israel. This should make Jonathan and David rivals at best. Yet Jonathan and David form a friendship and we see Jonathan warn David of his father's scheme to kill David. Their friendship will bind them together as brothers. Jonathan will be faithful to his father, they will even die in the same battle, but this will not in any way negate his friendship with David. Their friendship is stronger than blood and their hearts beat the same. I Samuel 18:1-4 speaks of their enduring and lasting friendship: *"After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David; and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt."*

David would not forget the love and friendship with Jonathan. He would make provisions for Jonathan's only surviving son to always have a place at David's table. (II Samuel 9)

The second "friend" in our lesson this morning is Timothy. He has been chosen by Paul to be a student. Paul would mentor the young Timothy in faith and train him to be a leader in the church. However, this young man found a special place in Paul's heart and he would be seen as a companion in ministry, a faithful friend and even as a son. Timothy was as concerned for the church as was Paul (v.20) and Paul would entrust him to carry on when Paul no longer would be able to. It was as if Paul was giving his child to another to raise.

At one point we began to wonder who would raise our sons if anything happened to us. I think it was after the death of Diane's mother, and for some reason we became aware of the need to have someone designated to care for our sons should something happen to us. It was not an easy decision to try to decide who we would trust the keeping and raising of our sons to should something happen to us. It was not easy for Paul, but in Timothy he found a faithful friend in whom he knew he could trust the future of the church. There is no one like Timothy. Timothy will not distort Paul's (Christ's) message. He will be a faithful friend to the church.

Our last "friend" is a young man from Philippi sent to Paul with a gift from the Church in Philippi, Epaphroditus. He has come to Rome with a monetary offering to

help Paul out during his imprisonment. While there he becomes sick, nearing death. Here was one that the church in Philippi counted as a friend to entrust bringing to Paul a gift for ministry. There were no Western Union offices and money could not be cabled from one location to another. This gift would be sent by someone the church trusted and it was in him that Paul found more than a monetary gift but also a gift of friendship. Though Paul would have liked to keep Epaphroditus in Rome he sends him back to Philippi with this letter and with his thanks for their gift and for them sending him a faithful friend.

We are bound in life together with others. We are bound by eternal friendships. Paul was not a Lone Ranger. I often think we would like to describe Paul as such. Such a one is able to do it alone – who does things his way and who does not need others to assist him in ministry. But this is not the image coming from the Scriptures. Paul is seldom mentioned as being alone. It is Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas, Paul and Timothy, Paul and the beloved physician, Luke. Paul finds strength, hope and encouragement in others. He teams up with Priscilla and Aquila in tent making. He calls so many people his friends and companions in the Gospel. One quickly discovers that Paul's strength comes from the support, prayers and friendship of others. It is Paul who seeks prayers for himself and the ministry. He cannot do it alone, he knows he and the church, and we need others if we are to move forward.

Think about your faith journey. When I say the word, "friend," whose image(s) come to your mind? Who do you consider faithful friends? (You almost preached this sermon for me this morning in our sharing time – you spoke of one another as friends who have stayed with you over the years of faith!)

I remember helping to train one of our missionaries to become "mission treasurer" in the Congo. This was back when the missionaries still did much of the work as nationals were still being trained – Marnie had little financial experience but she was the one who had the time and so she had come to the Valley Forge offices to learn. As we talked across our desks one day she shared some of her Congo experiences. She talked of how there would be days when she would grow discouraged. Then she smiled and said these were usually on Thursdays. As she continued she said how she had a group of women back in her home church in Massachusetts who met every Thursday and prayed for her and her work in Congo. She would remember these woman were thousands of miles away praying and her step would become a little lighter, her problems not quite as bad as she had envisioned – because she had faithful friends praying for her.

We are all here because of faithful friends. We have been encouraged, admonished, strengthened and supported by faithful friends. Friends who have stayed beside us when we were not in the best of moods or circumstances. Friends who remained that way even when we may have wanted to send them away.

Paul is encouraged by the love and support and friendship of the church in Philippi. They have stood beside him, even while he is in jail. How many of our friends would stand with us if we were jailed? They have not only stood beside him but have sent him Epaphroditus and a gift to help. They have given him hope and strength for another day. He is convinced of their friendship and their prayers and because of this

he writes: “*Finally brothers and sisters rejoice in the Lord.*” Rejoice because of faithful friends and their presence in our lives.

As I thought about this I remembered the story of Margaret and Ruth from one of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series:

In the spring of 1983 Margaret Patrick arrived at the Southeast Senior Center for Independent Living to begin her physical therapy. As Millie McHugh, a long-time staff member, introduced Margaret to the people at the center, she noticed the look of pain in Margaret’s eyes as she gazed at the piano.

“Is anything wrong?” asked Millie.

“No,” Margaret said softly. “It’s just that seeing a piano brings back memories. Before my stroke, music was everything to me.” Millie glanced at Margaret’s useless right hand as the black woman quietly told some of the highlights of her music career.

Suddenly Millie said, “Wait right here. I’ll be back in a minute.” She returned moments later, followed closely by a small, white-haired woman in thick glasses. The woman used a walker.

“Margaret Patrick,” said Millie, “meet Ruth Eisenberg.” Then she smiled. “She played the piano, but like you, she’s not able to play since her stroke. Mrs. Eisenberg has a good right hand, and you have a good left hand, and I have a feeling that together you two can do something wonderful.”

“Do you know Chopin’s Waltz in D flat?” Ruth asked. Margaret nodded.

Side by side, the two sat on the piano bench. Two healthy hands—one with long, graceful black fingers, the other with sort, plump white ones—moved rhythmically across the ebony and ivory keys. Since that day, they have sat together over the keyboard hundreds of times—Margaret’s helpless right hand around Ruth’s back, Ruth’s helpless left hand on Margaret’s knee, while Ruth’s good hand plays the melody and Margaret’s good hand plays the accompaniment...

Sharing the piano bench, Ruth heard Margaret say, “My music was taken away, but God gave me Ruth.” And evidently some of Margaret’s faith has rubbed off on Ruth as they’ve sat side by side these past five years, because Ruth is now saying, “It was God’s miracle that brought us together.”

God brings faithful friends into our lives and we need these faithful friends.

Swindoll, Charles, Laugh Again, OMF, Manila, 1992 (p.104)

Margaret, Patrick, A 4th Course of Chicken Soup for the Soul, Heath Communications, FL, 1997 (p.254-255)