

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
April 25, 2010  
I Samuel 18:1-4; John 15:12-17

### ***On Friendship***

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

*Friends are friends forever, if the Lord's the Lord of them  
And a friend will not say never, cause the welcome will not end  
Though it's hard to let you go, in the Father's hands I know  
That a lifetime's not too long... to live as friends.*

These beautiful words come from a very popular song by Michael W. Smith called simply enough, *Friends*. I'm guessing that by now you have figured out that this is the theme of the morning. And I'd like to approach it upon this premise. When we manage to bring faith and friendship together, we have a firm foundation for living. And when these two qualities bloom in a relationship, we have a very special gift. Allow me a gentle story to illustrate the power of this combination.

Susan Sanford is a psychologist and she speaks about a very difficult time in her life when she was suffering deep depression and physical back pain. The combination led her to consider ending her life. Though not a Christian herself, she had taken a short vacation with a friend who was. This was a friend who knew Susan well and who was sensitive to the struggles she was facing. In Susan's words, listen to what happened...

"Upstairs, I sprawled on top of my sleeping bag. Jeanie came in, knelt down beside me on the floor, and started to knead the painful knots around my lower and middle back. 'Susan,' she said, a little timidly, 'would you mind if I said a prayer for you?'

"I was surprised. Accusations ricocheted inside me. Don't you know, Jeanie, I'm lower than dirt. What God would listen to a prayer for a sinner like me? But I replied, 'Sure, if you want.'

'Clearing her throat as her hands continued to knead, Jeanie started to speak in a soft voice. "Dear Jesus, I'm not sure of what to say. But I come to you in prayer for my friend Susan.'

"As I lay there listening, I was amazed at the simplicity of her words. Even more amazing was her childlike confidence that God was actually listening to her prayer.... "Jeanie's prayer went on for five or 10 minutes, interspersed with times of silence while she continually rubbed my back. There was such a gentleness, depth of spirit.

"As I grew drowsy, I heard her conclude: 'Susan is hurting badly, Lord. Reach down and touch her. Let her know that you are the solution. Let her not despair. She is my good friend,

and I care about her so much. I know that you are the Almighty. You can do all things. And you can help her.'

"Then she leaned forward, gave me a hug, and said goodnight. Switching off the light, she quietly slipped from the room." (Ken Gire, Between Heaven and Earth: Prayer and Reflections That Celebrate an Intimate God (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 101-102)

Let me say it again... when we have faith and friendship in our lives, we have a strong foundation. To be honest, I shutter when thinking about what life would be like without these two ingredients. And as I've suggested, when we can bring them together into a special relationship, as Susan's friend demonstrated, it heightens the meaning of both. Let me tell you another wonderful story which brings this into clear focus.

There are two characters in the Bible who model the friendship paradigm. They could easily have been jealous of one another because they were in positions of contrasting power. David was the successful warrior and leader of battles with the Philistines. He was incredibly popular. Jonathan, his friend, was the rightful heir to the throne of Israel. Had they been jealous of one another, things could have been tense. But they had known each other since childhood when David was brought into the King's court to play the harp for Saul, Jonathan's father. Hence their friendship began to bloom when there were little boys.

Now the years have passed and as young adults they chose to make a friendship pact. And it's a good thing they did because Saul became very jealous of David. You see, he was threatened by the young warrior's popularity and success. So in order to remove the perceived threat, he set out to murder David. But because he knew of his son's friendship with the one being targeted, Saul promised that this war hero would always be safely protected.

I guess you can see how this speaks to the integrity of the king because behind his son's back, he plotted to take David's life. Luckily, Jonathon was no one's fool. So upon learning of his father's plans he sought out David and promised: "If I discover that my father intends to betray his pledge to me and instead seeks to murder you, I will tell you." In other words, he was putting his life on the line to protect his friend. And David asked, "How will I know this is happening?"

What follows is one of scripture's most tender scenes. Listen to what it says in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Samuel: 11-17 (New International Version). Jonathon says to David: "'Come, let's go out into the field.' So they went there together. Then Jonathan said to David: 'by the Lord, the God of Israel, I will surely sound out my father by this time the day after tomorrow! If he is favorably disposed toward you, will I not send you word and let you know? But if my father is inclined to harm you, may the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if I do not let you know and send you away safely. May the Lord be with you as he has been with my father... So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David saying, 'May the Lord call David's enemies to account.' And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.'"

But this isn't the end of the story. Fast forward to the day when both Saul and Jonathan, father and son, were killed in battle. Upon learning of the loss of his best friend, David wept. And even though this loss made him the king, he would rather have had his friend. So when he assumed the throne, as a gesture of his love, David located one last remaining descendent of Jonathan's... a poor, crippled and forgotten man whom no one really knew. And in an effort to honor his friendship with Jonathan, the new king made a place for him at the royal table. You see, these two friends loved each other as much as they loved themselves. Does this sound vaguely familiar to something Jesus taught us 2,000 years ago?

We recall the way he said it... *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and soul, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.* (John 13:34)

It's no coincidence that Jesus shared these words on the eve of his death. We save the most important things until the end, don't we? When there is no time to fool around and when things are deadly serious, we share from the depths of our being the things that are most essential. On that night, foremost on the mind of Jesus was this call to friendship. He knew that when we are drawn to one another through a common faith and when our friendships are cemented by that faith, we will withstand anything life brings.

Listen again to the way Jesus said it a little later that same evening. *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.* (John 15:12-15) I'll say it again for the third time... the sweetest and most precious things we embrace in this life are friendship and faith. There is no greater fulfillment.

By the grace of God, we have enjoyed this divine gift within the fellowship of First Baptist, haven't we. And the reason we have received this gift is because we bring a proper attitude to foster this caring environment.

Wayne Crosby said something last week in our Sunday School class that touched my heart. He was sharing an insight drawn from his experience of introducing people to new neighborhoods. They question him, "is this a friendly neighborhood?" and Wayne asks in return, "what was your last neighborhood like?" If they say, "it wasn't very friendly," he says, "Well, you probably won't find this one to be very friendly either." But if they say it was friendly, he is quick to say, "Yes, you will find this to be a very friendly neighborhood, too." You see the point... what we bring with our attitude will more often than not define the essence of our relationships. This story of David and Jonathan is a perfect example.

So in the spirit of their friendship, allow me to close by sharing with you an old adage. We all know it takes time to create friendships. They don't just blossom overnight. Well our Chinese brothers and sisters have a beautiful way of affirming this truth through a proverb. They say it is the fifth cup of tea between friends that is the best. What does that mean?

Well, in China... indeed in the Chinese culture, tea is often made simply by pouring hot water over loose tea leaves in a cup. Hence this proverb which unfolds like this.

When friends meet, busy and tense from the outside world, the first cup of tea doesn't take long to brew and it is drunk hastily and without much grace. But the second pouring of water requires a longer time to steep the leaves. This is better. The third cup requires still more time. The fourth cup stands for an appreciable length of time before the tea is of the required strength. But it is the fifth cup that becomes the symbol of friendship at its best. With the quiet passage of time, measured in cups of tea, we define our deepest friendships. I've learned that when visiting in the home of a Chinese friend, you never have just one cup of tea, and now I understand why. It isn't just about quenching one's thirst. It's about embracing one's friendship.

Larry and Kay Ward... in your very special and loving ways, you have grown to enjoy the fifth cup of tea with more people than anyone I have ever known. We release you now, dear friends, to a new life with your family in a new neighborhood in a new city. Go with our blessing and as you leave, I give you this box of Chinese tea to carry with you as you open your hearts to new people. May you forever enjoy that fifth cup of tea, and may you never forget that the leaves will always be steeping for you right here in Midland.

Amen and AMEN!