

The First Baptist Church, Midland
July 11, 2010
John 15:12-17

A Three Stranded Rope...
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Friendship

Recently I've made a new friend. His name is John Lane and David introduced me to him about 5 or 6 weeks ago. John works at The Community Center where his official title is "Personal Trainer". But don't let that fool you. Folks have a lot of other names for him, too. Some of you who have studied personality formation will recognize the descriptor, *driver-driver*. This is used to describe someone who pushes excessively to get things done. John makes "driver-drivers" look docile.

The first day I met John we sat and talked for a long time. He asked me a lot of questions and listened attentively. We then made arrangements for my first venture to the health center and I'll never forget it.

First I started with 15 minutes on the treadmill at a pretty comfortable pace. I was thinking I'd be through when my time was up because when you first start to exercise you take it easy, right. We went from there to 15 minutes on the elliptical or cross-trainer. After 5 minutes I thought I was down for the count but we pressed on and I made my goal. Now I really thought we were through.

Wrong again because we then ventured into the room with the BIG exercise balls. We worked out in there for another 15 minutes while he introduced me to a variety of new positions for stretching that I didn't think were possible. From there we went to the dreaded "hallway". Folks who know John and who see him leading another victim to the hallway just chuckle to themselves because they know what's coming. Of course, I had no idea and by this time I could hardly stand up. He introduced me to four new very strange ways of traversing the 30 yards of tile. By the time we got to the end of the fourth one, I knew what it felt like to be in a "walking coma". But still we weren't finished. We returned to the room with the big exercise balls one more time where we stretched for another 10 minutes. "Stretching," he told me, "is the key to preparing your muscles to withstand the assault they are receiving and to building stamina." Do you know, he was right. You would think I would be in agony the next day but I can truthfully say I didn't have an ache or pain. Oh, I was tired but I didn't hurt. And then after this free day to repair my tired body, I was ready to go for session two the next day.

I'm still at it and can honestly say things haven't gotten any easier. That's because John keeps introducing new exercises to the routine that are more demanding all the time. And you don't do these new things until you've gone through all those other old things I just described. Last week we returned to that huge exercise ball and began working on "balance".

The object is to sit on it while lifting your arms and legs in the air while maintaining balance at the same time. *RIGHT!* It sounds kind of silly, doesn't it, but the purpose is to build

core strength especially in the abdominal area. I didn't believe I'd ever regain any strength in that area given my medical history, but my friend John assures me I will. So far my best time before falling is about 5 seconds. It's a good thing he's got a lot of those thick mats surrounding the exercise area.

But here's the thing. As I said, my best time is 5 seconds if I'm on my own. However, if John stands next to me and places a hand on the ball, I can sit there for minutes on end without falling. It's amazing how such a small contribution can literally change things in a dramatic way. One never knows where a helping hand might lead.

Now I'm guessing you can see the point of this illustration. Sure there are those times when we need to stand (or in this exercise, sit) alone for our own good. But in the big picture, if we are going to succeed in life we must be willing to stand by one another to extend a helping hand whenever the opportunity affords. And we need to be willing to receive that hand, too. Through experience we learn that there are some upon whom we can depend and there are others of whom we cannot be certain. The people we come to embrace and trust we call "friends" and it doesn't take long to learn that this world is a better place because of them. So today we are asking the question, *what do friends look like?*

I don't doubt that we could all take a few minutes and easily draw up a list of the characteristics that describe friendship. What are a few that come readily to your mind? (At this point, the congregation is encouraged to respond.)

Without a doubt, these are all wonderful qualities. There is so much to be said about friendship. And as I thought about it this week, I boiled it down to two. Let's face it, you would rebel pretty quickly if I shared a sermon with 25 points. So what are the two upon which I'd like to focus?

The first quality of friendship that I consider to be indispensable is the ability to listen. We've all heard the old adage: *God has given us two ears and only one mouth. Therefore we should listen twice as much as we talk.* Good advice, and it doesn't stand without firm Biblical foundation. There is a classic example which unfolds in the book of Job.

Job was, of course, a very wealthy patriarch. He had anything and everything a person could want. And perhaps his greatest treasure was his warm and loving family. So you see, he was loved, respected, and admired.

But one day his life fell apart. He was stripped of his wealth and his family was killed. Alone, desolate and broken, Job began to curse the day he was born. But then, in the midst of his mourning and pain, he encountered three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. They engaged in conversation and slowly began to help Job grow beyond his remorse. They allowed him to speak of his experience and listened with a sympathetic ear. Oh, they challenged him at points to be sure, but always they listened to his response. As a result, Job was able to reflect upon his experience, place the events in a wider perspective, take hold of his predicament, and find some meaning even in all the distress. That would never have been possible had he not been afforded

the gift of a listening ear. As a result, he grew through his bitterness to a personal encounter with God.

It is no mistake that this book of Job is included in our sacred scriptures. Though there are many who argue its validity and purpose, there can be no question that it carries a message vital to the nurture and growth of God's people. Through its testimony and example, it clearly calls us to befriend one another and to walk even through life's valleys by lending a listening ear.

We've all had this experience, haven't we? I remember a hospitalization many, many years ago. It was through that hard time that I gained a good friend in my physician. Why? Because he was very willing to listen.

Not only did he probe for information about the physical issues. He also stood with me at a critical time literally understanding my fears and concerns for the future. I know he sensed my insecurity because he listened in such an intentional and caring way, and I'm confident his kindness had a lot to do with my rapid recovery.

Contrast that with the pastoral support I received through this ordeal. A pastor from the community who somehow heard I was a minister stopped by to visit. His stay was brief (for which I was grateful) and to the point. I heard all about how busy he was and clearly inferred how his precious time could have been much more constructively spent elsewhere rather than in the hospital. Not once did he ask me how I was, and I couldn't help but wonder why he even stopped. Now I ask... who proved to be a friend to this person in need? I tell you it was the one who knew how to listen.

Then there is a second quality of friendship to consider. Simply stated, a friend is one who – after listening - cares enough to respond. It is one thing to be a listener but quite another to act upon the message received. At this point my thoughts turn to the apostle Paul and the young man he befriended named Timothy. The experience of the two is powerful and illustrates well the point at hand.

I am thinking of the incident recorded at the end of the second letter to Timothy. Paul was in Rome and it was clear his life was nearing its end. He was in prison and most of his friends had deserted him. Only Luke continued to stand by his side. More than anything, Paul wanted to meet with Timothy one more time so he wrote with a request. After laying out his suggestions for ministering effectively, Paul ended with a note of urgency. **“Do your best to come before winter,”** he pleaded (2 Timothy 4:9).

Upon hearing this, the young apostle undoubtedly pondered his response. He knew the peril Paul was facing and understood it could come his way as well. Guilt by association can be a frightening thing. Yet he chose to respond immediately and it's a good thing he did because had he waited he would probably never have seen Paul again. For the winter season was approaching and it would have been impossible to book passage to Rome. The seas would have been too rough to travel.

Tradition tells us, however, that Timothy didn't delay. Because of his haste, he had some time with his mentor and dear friend before Paul was beheaded. Hence, the phrase *come before winter* has grown to be a symbol of response within the realm of friendship.

You now, when I think about these two necessary ingredients in the recipe for friendship... the ability to listen and the willingness to respond... I can't help but think about these words from Jesus in John 15. **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”** That's what this mandate is all about, isn't it. When Jesus talks about bearing fruit toward this end, I have no doubt that these are the kinds of qualities he is encouraging us to embrace. For what do friends do but engage one another by listening and then responding to the point of need.

You know, we may not always enjoy reading through the book of Ecclesiastes because there are places where it is quite depressing. But there are also those places where wisdom unfolds in some very productive ways. One of those places is in the 4th chapter when the writer speaks to the value of a friend. I love the way Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation of the Bible called The Message (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

*By yourself you're unprotected.
With a friend you can face the worst.
Can you round up a third?
A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.*

The more people we can embrace within our circle of friendship, the stronger we become. Just last week when we were traveling to Minneapolis to be part of Beth Yue's wedding celebration, we traveled Route 2 through the Upper Peninsula. And as we were going over the Mackinaw Bridge, Paula turned on the radio station that tells you about the bridge. I can't remember the exact numbers, but there are hundreds of miles of cables that are wound together to form the support upon which the bridge is suspended. One cable standing by itself would be powerless to hold the bridge and all its traffic. But twist many of those cables together, and the strength is multiplied and magnified enormously.

So it is, dear friends, when we entwine ourselves with each other. The more of us who extend our hands in friendship to lift one another up, the stronger the bonds will become and, by the way, the stronger we will become, too.

One final thought. Louis Austin in his book, This I Believe, wrote, “Our Maker gave us two hands. One to hold to him, the other to our fellow man. If our hands are full of – or struggling for – possessions, we can hold to neither God nor humanity. If, however, we hold fast to him who gave us life, who is our ever-present Partner, his loving Spirit will flow through us and out to our neighbor. This is the way of joy, love, achievement and inner peace.” And I would add, these entwined hands are the way of friendship, too!

Amen and AMEN!