

DAVID AND JONATHAN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP

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Today we continue our focus on core stories from the life of King David. Our narrative tells us of the friendship between David and Jonathan. It is a story that teaches us the importance of human friendships for a full life. It can help us appreciate the gifts of friendship.

Jonathan was one of King Saul's three sons. When David came to Saul's camp and helped to defeat Goliath, as we heard last week, he was introduced to Jonathan. They became fast friends. The friendship with David often put Jonathan in a very difficult position. As time went on David and King Saul evolved into adversaries. Saul saw David as a threat to his rule. There were times that Saul wanted to kill David, and Jonathan helped David escape. Saul saw David not only as a threat to himself but also as a rival successor to his son Jonathan.

Even though it might have been in Jonathan's self interest to do away with David, he remained true to his friendship. After another escape engineered by Jonathan from King Saul's wrath the two friends made a covenant with each other that ended with the words: **Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his whole life.**

The strength of Jonathan's words about a friend can make us feel uncomfortable. We moderns do not always use the word love when talking about friendship. We usually say we like our friends, not love them. In the last couple of hundred years friendship has not been held in as high regard as romantic love or the love of parents for children.

So much about human relationships has been sexualized. Some commentators have suggested that David and Jonathan had a romantic relationship. I think this reflects the belief that we should not take friendship too seriously. We admit, of course, that people need a "few friends". But the very tone of the admission makes it clear that we do not value friendship as being as important as other types of love. People seldom make it central to life.

While we often ignore the importance of friendship, we sense its importance. One of the most difficult aspects of the early days of Covid was being cut-off from friends. When friends move away it can feel like a small death. But we find it hard to admit that pain.

This may be because friendship is seemingly the least natural of all human loves. Other human loves have a clear biological root. You and I would not be alive if it were not for romantic love. Without erotic love none of us would have been begotten. The love between parent and children helps to care for both young and old. There is an emotional bonding between parents and children which may well have a biological root.

But friendship does not have a clear biological reason for being. There is not a transparent connection with the survival of the species with friendship. This may in part explain why our culture, which is so strongly naturalistic, has not placed a very high value on friendship.

This was not the case in the ancient world. The ancient world's estimation of the various kinds of love is the inverse of our age. The ancient Greeks prized friendship very highly. They organized their society in a way to promote long and deep friendships. In Athens it was possible for friends, especially males, to spend most of their time together. Some would work together. Many spent their time in the governing assemblies and since all formed the armed forces they spent time training. Friends frequently dined together and spent evenings in conversation and entertainment. Friendships were understood to be an important building block of society. This continued into Christian History. The greatest theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas tells us: **There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship.**

In both of our Scripture lessons for today we are given examples of friendship. In our Old Testament Lesson we read how Jonathan and David supported each other in their lives. In the Gospel of John we are told that John is the disciple that Jesus loved. Among all the disciples it seems that Jesus had one disciple whose personality meshed with his the best.

Thus, the first important learning from the story of David and Jonathan is that friendship is important.

The second learning from this story is that friendship is grounded in mutuality. Each person brings something to the relationship.

Friendship is a love which often begins with a shared activity or vision of the world. If a picture of erotic love is two people staring into each other's eyes, the picture of friendship is two people standing next to each other gazing out at the world.

Friendship begins in a shared activity or concern. This can run a whole gamut of activities-sharing recipes, reading the same books, sharing the same occupation, playing tennis, working for a political candidate, going to the same church, or having children the same age. People are drawn together because of something they have in common.

I have at different times of my life had a wide variety of friends as different as my interests. I have had friends to play and talk sports, others who read the same books, others with whom I argued politics, and the list could go on and on.

That is how friendship begins. We are drawn to others who share a concern or activity with us, but friendships can deepen. In spending time together we can grow to love our friend's character. Friendships grow through shared experiences of life. Friendship is a relationship of equality in which each gives to the other. Friendship is a two way street in which both parties bring something to the relationship.

A unique quality of friendship is that it is voluntary. There is a great element of duty between a parent and child. Romantic love leads to commitments for life. But friendships are always voluntary and can end at any time. We remain friends out of choice not because we should or have to. This allows great freedom in friendship.

What gifts does friendship add to our lives as humans?

Some recent research has shown that one of the building blocks of human society is cooperation rather than survival of the fittest. It was when human beings began to learn to work together rather than fight that human society developed. Friendship helps to foster this cooperation and brings civility to common life.

Friendship helps to shape our character. People gather together because of common interests, activities, values, and world views. Our friendships tend to re-enforce our values and beliefs. It is easier to follow a difficult path when we have others joining us.

Three hundred years ago there was a group of friends who found each other at Oxford University in England. They were all religious young men who felt the Church of England had lost a vital part of the Christian faith. They each had a desire to grow in holiness themselves. So they began to gather together for prayer and to encourage each other in the faith. That small circle of friends included John and Charles Wesley. These friends began the Methodist movement.

However, we must be cautious and aware that friendship is not always a positive in the development of our character. Bad character can be re-enforced as well as good. Parents are rightly concerned about what their children's friends are like. Friends with good habits re-enforce the good and friends with bad behaviors are shaping the character in a negative way.

You and I should be concerned with the kind of friends that we have. What do we share with our friends? Do we share prejudices and destructive habits or do we share positive hopes and interests. Our choices in friends do not only reflect our character, but molds us into the person we are becoming.

Another gift friends can give us is the encouragement to use gifts we are not clear we have. Early in the 20th century a group of friends interested in literature began gathering twice a week in Oxford. They called themselves The Inklings. One day each week they would gather at a Pub called the Eagle and Child and another night at C.S. Lewis lodgings. While they had lots of deep and extensive discussions, they would also read whatever work they were engaged in at the time. The Inklings heard Lewis read some of the Narnia Chronicles. Tolkien was working on his fiction that he found hard to complete. It was only because of the encouragement and support of Lewis and the others, that Tolkien was able to complete and publish his epic Lord of the Rings. Our friends can push us to become more than we think we are ourselves.

Another gift of friendship is allowing ourselves to be fully who we are. It is friends who allow us to be ourselves. If naked bodies are a symbol of romantic love then naked personalities are the symbol of friendship.

The Statler Brothers used to sing a song that rehearsed all the roles that we play as human beings. They sang –to my boss I am a worker, to my father a son who is following in his footsteps, to Children I am the father who provides a home, to my wife I am a husband and the list goes on of the roles that must be fulfilled and finally the lament in the refrain “Can’t I just be me to you” is addressed to a close friend.

All of the other loves in life demand we play our part, but this is not the case with friendship. The voluntary nature of friendship enables us to be completely ourselves with friends we have known for a long time. Friends who have proven our trust make us free to expose ourselves as we really are. For we know we are accepted and loved. Marriage is most successful when erotic love and friendship are found in the same person.

If friendship is to survive long and thrive it must be shaped by a higher love. The perfect love of God feeds friendship. Friendship is the bond between two or more personalities attracted to each other. If personality is part of the bond of friendship it can also cause it to end. As people get to know each other better over time they will discover things about each other they will not like or approve. If friendship is to grow learning tolerance is necessary. Just think of your own friendships. Think of how some have been hurt or ended by petty incidents. Small differences of opinions or viewpoints cause trouble. These will arise in every relationship. This can be a time for growth; we can learn tolerance and forgiveness. But often small differences or petty misunderstandings undermine our friendships.

This can help us understand the importance of divine love. The perfect love of God teaches us to respect the reality of others. If we have learned to respect the independent reality of others, we can agree to differ and also learn to forgive. Friendship is a wonderful place to learn how to allow God’s love to shape our human loves.

Finally, learning about friendship can help us to understand our relationship with Jesus. Jesus said you are my friends if you keep my commandments. You and I can claim Jesus as our friend. Jesus does not only want to be our Lord and Savior he also wants to be our friend. It is Jesus who can shape our character and mold us into something good and beautiful. In the presence of Jesus, we can truly be our real selves. One of the great joys of the faith is coming to know Jesus as our friend. We can relate to Jesus in many ways, but the most personal is friend. Jesus is a friend who helps us become our true selves.

When Jesus agonized over his impending death-He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and took the disciples who were his friends, Peter, James and John with him. They were there as he expressed his misgivings and apprehension. These friends were a source of support for him.

As David and Jonathan supported one another as friends, may we learn to value friendship. May we cultivate relationships with those people who will support our lives in a positive way. May we, most of all, cultivate our friendship with Jesus.