

## Called to Friendship

1 Samuel 17:55-18:3

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

The friendship between Jonathan and David is one of the Bible's classic depictions of what God wants to give to all of us. But like all of God's gifts, this one has a few surprises.

Lately, it has become quite popular to characterize our society as being disinterested in committed relationships and preoccupied with the individual pursuit of happiness. But I don't think that's true. I think we are very interested in committed friendships; we just aren't very good at them.

If you ask people, and I often do, why they struggle with friendships, some will tell you that they got burned once, and it is hard to let someone get close again. Others will say the problem is that they just don't know how to make friends. A man recently said to me that he was very good at making money, but making friends was a lot harder for him. Others will say they are just too busy. Still others will say that the problem is that our society is now too mobile, and it is hard to keep investing in people who float in and out of our lives. Well, those are all challenges to friendships, but not our basic problem. Let me tell you what I think the number one problem is to finding friends. We don't know how to receive them.

Having despaired of making ourselves happy with money, sex, or power, we tell ourselves that all we really need is just to make a good friend or two. But life is not something you make. It's something you receive from the Maker. Nowhere is that more obvious than in friendship. We don't actually "make friends." We receive them as a grace from God. According to our text today, the friends God would give you are not the kind of friends you would get for yourself.

By all appearances, Jonathan and David had no business being friends. Most of what society has taught us about cultivating friends goes out the window on this one. They haven't spent a lot of time together and they haven't got a prayer of being together in the future. They have nothing in common and come from incredibly different backgrounds. Prince Jonathan, the son of King Saul, had received the best education and enjoyed all the privileges of growing up in the royal court. David was educated in the wilderness with a bunch of sheep. This is a friendship only God could have created.

Apparently they met right after David had killed Goliath. King Saul had summoned David into his presence in Jerusalem. So David came, carrying with him the head of Goliath! Which is only something a guy who had grown up in the wilderness would do. Can you imagine this scene in the royal court with everybody dressed in their finest, Saul sitting on the central throne. There stands ruddy David and, well, some of Goliath. Everybody had to have been grossed out by this. Everybody except Jonathan.

We are told that the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David. In the old Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word is "knit." So the text reads, "Jonathan's soul was knit to the soul of David." The word is passive in the Hebrew, which means it was something that happened to Jonathan. This wasn't a friendship he chose. It was chosen for him by God.

What makes this even more powerful is that King Saul had just completed a disturbing conversation with David, asking him, "Whose son are you, young man?" Saul knew David already, and was well aware that he was the son of Jesse. When David came to the royal court to play the harp for Saul, he had been introduced as Jesse's son. Saul had even been in correspondence with Jesse about David. But now that David was being celebrated as the giant-slayer, Saul felt threatened and knew that he had to get a reign on this boy. So his plan was to make David part of his house. We are told that Saul wouldn't let David leave. Some Bible scholars have indicated that this question, "Whose son are you," was actually a way of asking, "Will you be my son?" It's a test of allegiance -- a test that David fails by saying again that he is the son of Jesse.

Saul wanted desperately to absorb David, which is how many of us approach friendships, and that is what makes us repel them. Like Saul, we don't really want friends when we have agendas for them. If you need a friend to take away your loneliness or be your companion, then you are reducing David to his instrumental value in your life. Friendships based on need are addictions, and they will not satisfy you any more than the money, sex, or power did.

So here is the contrast: Saul wants to absorb David to meet his needs, and Jonathan wants only to love David. We are told, "The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and he loved him as his own soul." Now that assumes a certain amount of self-love. For some of us to love another as we love ourselves would be no great blessing. But Jonathan didn't need David in his life to find love. So the secret to receiving friends is to first be self-sufficient before God. Only then are you free to give love to another.

Jonathan takes off his royal robe and sword and places them on David. It is as if Jonathan is helping David fulfill his anointed calling to be king. That is the biblical definition of a true friend. A friend is one who is knit to your soul by God for the purpose of helping you fulfill your calling.

C.S. Lewis has written that the posture of friends is to stand side by side looking ahead, as opposed to lovers who look at each other face to face. "Friendship must be about something," Lewis observes. "That is why those who simply want friends can never have any. Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers."

This is a very different understanding of friendship than we learned from popular culture, which tells us that the relationship is the sole agenda. According to the Bible, the sole agenda is to respond to the call of God, and like the rest of life, your friends have to keep you focused on that singular call.

This also means that biblical friendships are not even about mutuality. What is Jonathan getting out of his friendship with David? Nothing but a lot of heartache and struggle with his father who wants to preserve his dynasty. So why would Jonathan befriend David and help fulfill his anointed calling to rule Israel even when that means Jonathan will not be the next king? Because God knit his soul to David's soul. This means Jonathan knew his own calling. It was to be David's soul-friend.

Friendship is one of the most underrated means of exercising spirituality. It is as critical to our souls as prayer and Bible Study. It's almost a sacrament. Like water or bread and wine, friendship takes what is common in human experience and turns it into something holy. But the friendship is never about the friends, any more than baptism is about water. It is always and only about God's holy purposes in each other's lives.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel has written that the thing that makes a relationship holy in the Scriptures is the creative space that is formed between them. It is into this space that the Holy descends. Jesus said almost the same thing when he promised, "When two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in the midst of them." In both the Old and the New Testaments we find the same amazing claim that we cannot know God's holy purposes for our lives, and we certainly cannot fulfill them, apart from the sacred space between soul-friends that is filled by God. Without the soul-friend there is no creative space, no recognition of the Savior among us, and no understanding of our calling in life. So it is never enough to anonymously worship on Sundays. You need to be knit to someone's soul.

When I was a boy reading this story, I used to long for a friend like a Jonathan. But as I have matured a bit in the faith, I have learned that is the wrong prayer. What I should be asking is not how to find a friend like Jonathan, but how to be a friend like Jonathan? To whom is God knitting your soul? Whose sacred calling are you helping to fulfill, no matter the cost? Those are the questions the Bible is asking today.

Well, things go from bad to worse between David and Saul who went crazy with jealousy over David's triumphs over the Philistines. Jonathan tries to intercede with his father, but to no avail. After Saul's sixth attempt at killing David, it became painfully clear that David has to flee for his life.

In the twentieth chapter of 1 Samuel we are given a glimpse of the heart-wrenching day these best of

friends have to say good-bye knowing they will never see each other again. David was hiding out in the fields. Jonathan came to deliver the horrible news that there would be no reconciliation with Saul. The two fell on each other's necks, weeping, with David weeping the most. But Jonathan said to him, "Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord saying, 'The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants forever.'"

In every friendship there comes a day for saying goodbye. It isn't just because we live in a mobile society. It's because friendships, like all of God's gifts, have to be held with open hands. A day will come for saying goodbye to one you don't want to give up. Even if that day can be postponed to a funeral, it will still come. How do you survive saying goodbye to a soul-friend? The way Jonathan did. By remembering that it was the Lord who gave you this friendship, and the Lord "shall be between me and you. . . forever."

It was never the circumstances that created Jonathan and David's friendship. It was the Lord who was in the creative space between them. Even if that space is enlarged by great distance, the Lord remains between you forever. Since the Lord was responsible for the love you enjoyed, and the Lord remains, that means you get to keep the love. It is the only thing we do get to keep, even as we cross the river to heaven where there are no more goodbyes.

Today, O God, we ask not to be Saul who absorbs people, but to be Jonathan who loves a friend and seeks the fulfillment of your holy calling in his or her life, whatever the cost. Amen.