

1 Samuel 17:55-18:3
You've Got a Friend
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As soon as Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, "Abner, whose son is this youth?" And Abner said, "As your soul lives, O king, I do not know." And the king said, "Inquire whose son the boy is." And as soon as David returned from the striking down of the Philistine, Abner took him, and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.

Before we begin, think for a moment about your favorite thing to do with a friend when you were young. Take a moment and then turn to your neighbor and share with them: ready, set, go.

When you're down and troubled and you need a helping hand
and nothing, whoa, nothing is going right.
Close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there
to brighten up even your darkest nights.

If the sky above you should turn dark and full of clouds
and that old north wind should begin to blow,
keep your head together and call my name out loud.
Soon I will be knocking upon your door.

You just call out my name, and you know where ever I am I'll come running to see you
again.
Winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you have to do is call and I'll be there.
You've got a friend.

When you think of the word *friendship*, you probably remember riding bikes, eating ice cream, sitting up late at a sleep over, long conversations over a cup of coffee, perhaps even having someone there for you when you were in a jam or had just gone through something difficult. At first listen, this is what we might think of when we hear these lyrics of James Taylor—all the ways that others enrich our lives and make us the happy, contented, or at the very least, non-lonesome people that we are.

But at a closer look, these words reveal something of a different picture. Turns out James Taylor is a pretty good theologian when it comes to the theology of friendship.

When we think of friendship in the Bible, the story that may come to mind is the story of David and Jonathan. If you look closely at his lyrics of "You've got a Friend," you can almost hear Jonathan pondering his relationship with David.

Eugene Peterson writes, a friend like Jonathan is one “who isn’t looking for someone to use, is leisurely enough to find out what’s really going on in us, is secure enough not to exploit our weaknesses or to attack our strengths, recognizes our inner life and understands the difficulty of living out our inner convictions, confirms what is deepest within us. A friend.”

Friendship is one of the most valuable traits that a person who commits their life to following Jesus can consider. This kind of friendship is really a spiritual discipline, like prayer or worship or study. The type of friendship between David and Jonathan has an almost sacramental nature about it.

So what does God and the Bible have to say about my friendships? Well, it depends on where you stand. Seems David was the one who received the gift of a loyal friend. David was the truly blessed one to have a Jonathan in his life. I don’t know who else might be blessed to have a Jonathan, but I’m sure they’re out there.

On the other hand though, if Jonathan is who you look to—whose name, parenthetically means “gift of God”, just sayin’—then there is deep and profound wisdom to be had.

You see, the Bible has less to say about what kind of friends we should have as it does about what kinds of friends we should be. The Bible says less about the kind of relationships we should seek, as it does about the kind of relationship we should offer.

First Samuel 18 begins with this remarkable statement: the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David. Interestingly, this verb “knit” (or in other translations they use the word “bound”) shows up in the passive voice. It wasn’t Jonathan who agreed to or sought out this friendship; they don’t even have all that much in common. It is the sovereignty of God that brings these two together—it’s the only conceivable reason. David is a shepherd, Jonathan a prince; David comes in from the field in his tattered work clothes, Jonathan is wearing royal robes; David got his education out in the field protecting the sheep and contemplating God, while Jonathan was educated in the courts of the king. David and Jonathan don’t have very much in common, except that God who brought these two men together.

In the first of the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, while Samwise is snooping around Bilbo’s house after his party, he is snatched in through the window by Gandalf after hearing about the Ring of Power. In that moment, Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins are knit together, bound to each other by Gandalf. Neither one of them planned it, but one outside them joined their journeys together.

Like Sam to Frodo, Jonathan is joined to David in a covenant relationship. And as we remember from our earlier studies of the Old Testament, God takes covenants pretty seriously.

God made a covenant promise to Abraham that God would be his God, that he would bless Abraham so that Abraham would be a blessing to others. In Covenant Theology, there is a binding agreement that takes place to keep the terms of the agreement. And what God promised Abraham was that not only would God promise to keep his end of the agreement, but he would also promise to keep Abraham’s end of the bargain. This covenant was completely one sided; God’s promise to Abraham was secure whether Abraham was faithful to it or not.

This is the first thing we learn about friendship from the Bible: true friends are more concerned

about what they give rather than what they get.

Prayer of St. Francis

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

But like Sam and Frodo, David and Jonathan's friendship is fraught with ups and downs. Nothing about it is safe.

During the next two chapters of 1 Samuel, David will spend most of his time running for his life. Saul has so much resentment coursing through him that six times he tries to bump David off, three of them with a spear thrown at David. David didn't have a lot of safety in his life during these chapters, but what the writer wants us to see is how this theme of covenanted friendship provides the subtext for David's life. Even though there was chaos everywhere, Jonathan remained the steady constant.

Do you have someone in your life who is like this? Someone you go to when the winds and waves begin to surge? Someone who you don't even need to speak with terribly often, but when you do, you just pick up right where you left off? Do you have a friend like this? Better yet, are you someone another can come to for this kind of safety?

You'll notice that while David is running for his life, Jonathan isn't texting him asking, "David, why aren't you answering my texts? Are you ignoring me? I feel under appreciated. WTF (What a Terrible Friend)."

We've all had moments where we feel like we're being pinned to the wall, where it feels like someone is out to get us. We're exposed and vulnerable. What we need in that moment is someone to be our sanctuary. Someone who we're willing to let look into the inner realms of our soul—unsafe and frightening as it may be.

The first two things we see in David and Jonathan's friendship are: 1. They don't have that much in common, except a covenant, and 2. They're not safe. The third thing we see is that David and Jonathan's friendship is not terribly mutual. We assume that friendships are give and take, but 1 Samuel tells of how Jonathan does most of the giving and David does most of the taking. At one point, Jonathan gives David his robes, his shield, his sword, and his belt—Jonathan acknowledged that David was the true King, even though he was prince. It seems like this friendship is costing Jonathan everything and benefitting David completely. But Jonathan would say that he is getting the benefit of loving David.

Mutual benefit is not a biblical quality of friendships; after all, there is another person in our faith who gave everything he had for his friends who often didn't do much in return. In John 15, Jesus called the disciples his friends, but we definitely know what that friendship cost Jesus—it cost him everything.

So, let's recap: this friendship is NOT equal, it's NOT safe, it's NOT mutual. But what is a friendship like this? What does it mean for me?

We spend a lot of time analyzing the ways our friends are with us. "He wasn't there when I needed him." "She just doesn't understand me." "They're not available enough." Because we are good at thinking of relationships as rights and needs that we demand, and not enough time thinking of them as means of grace entrusted to us. Like I said, our friendships are as much a sacrament and spiritual discipline as prayer, worship, and communion are.

Just like these communion elements, friendships take the ordinary things of flesh and blood, body and soul, and fill them with the Holy Spirit, giving them uncommon and holy significance. These common threads become a means of grace. And sometimes the only thing you have in common with one another is simply the fact that God has brought you together for such a time as this.

Friendships are hard work. We never have enough time with each other. They get messy. But it's in the mess and in the mire where the light of God's grace appears when we least expect it.

There's a moment toward the end of *The Lord of the Rings* where Sam and Frodo are together on Mount Doom, almost to their goal. But the burden of the ring has become so great that Frodo collapses under its pressure. His exhaustion is so great, he can only whisper and feels unable to take another step.

Sam cradles Frodo in his arms and seeks to comfort him. He reminds him of what life was like back in the Shire. But Frodo wearily replies, "I can't remember the taste of food, I can't recall the sound of water or the touch of grass. There's nothing."

Then Sam says, "Let's be rid of it [referring to the ring] once and for all. Come on, Mr. Frodo. I can't carry it for you. But I can carry you. Come on."

Sam hoists Frodo onto his back and carries him to the top of Mount Doom to get rid of the ring for good.

Sometimes God calls us to bear one another's burdens. Sometimes He calls us to bear one another – to carry one another.

Let me ask you again today: Do you have that kind of friend in your life? Do you have a David to whom you are bound in covenantal love, and strengthened by God's grace and mercy? They aren't as far off as you'd think.