

# “Friends”

1 Samuel 18:1-5; Romans 16:10-16 <sup>1</sup>

I doubt that it's possible to see the title of this message without thinking at least for a moment about the popular TV sitcom of the same name. While that show had a number of qualities about which we might object from the perspective of Christian living, it did highlight the great interest in and deep need for friends in each of our lives.

I expect that most of us, if asked, would say that we have a lot of friends. I also expect that what we really mean by that is that we have a lot of acquaintances—people we've met, and whose names we know, but whom we don't really know in any substantial or deep way. I suppose that there are many ways we might try to gain a more accurate notion of how many real friends we have; and I'm going to suggest a fairly simple one.

Most, if not all, telephones these days have a feature called “speed dial.” This feature allows us to dial frequently-used numbers by pushing only one—or at most, two—number keys. As we think about friends this morning, I wonder who's on your speed dial list? More particularly, I wonder who's on that list who is neither co-worker nor family? Is there anybody?

How does someone become sufficiently important to you to get listed in your cell directory? How does someone become sufficiently important to you to get on your speed dial list? That's what we're going to wonder about together this morning.

Our texts this morning take two slightly different approaches to friendship. In our first text, we read that “*After David had finished talking with Saul, he met Jonathan, the king's son. There was an immediate bond of love between them, and they became the best of friends*” (1 Samuel 18:1). The friendship between David and Jonathan is legendary, and is an illustration of those extraordinary friendships we sometimes call “best friends.”

When Bob Greene's wife died, his spirit was so numb that he felt dead himself, an experience with which many in this room can identify. When the phone rang the next morning, Bob didn't want to answer it. He didn't want to talk to anybody, but he picked up the handset to hear the voice of his dear friend, Jack, who lived hundreds of miles away.

“I didn't want to hear any voice—even his voice,” Bob wrote. “I just wanted to cover myself with darkness. I knew Jack would be asking if there was anything he could do . . . but I should have known that he'd already done it.

“I'm in Chicago,” he said. I misunderstood him. I thought he was offering to come to Chicago.

“I took the first flight this morning”—he was already in Chicago. “I know you probably don't want to see anyone, and that's all right. I've checked into a hotel, and I'll just sit in the room in case you need me to do anything. I can do whatever you want, or I can do nothing.”

“He meant that,” Bob reflected. “Jack knew that the best thing he could do was to be present in the same town with me and to tell me he was here. And he did just sit there. I guess he watched TV or did some work, waiting until I gathered the strength to say that I needed him.

“Mostly he sat with me quietly that week, knowing that I didn't require conversation, didn't welcome chatter, and didn't need anything beyond the knowledge that he was there. He brought food for my children, and, by sharing my silent pain, Jack got me through those awful days.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on May 23, 2010 (Pentecost Sunday).

Do you have any friends like that? We're blessed indeed if we can count a handful of such friends across a lifetime. Jill is my very, very best friend, of course, in every way; but I also have the names of six men written in the margin of my Bible beside 1 Samuel 18:1. They are the names of my best friends, friends like Jack, in each chapter of my life. I was in Richmond on Tuesday and Wednesday for a Virginia Baptist gathering, and I spent Tuesday night at the home of Meryl Moore, whose name is the third on that list.

Meryl and I were at Naval Officer Candidate School together in Rhode Island in 1972. We hiked and adventured all over New England, and we've been friends ever since. We've visited in each other's homes over the years, and we've journeyed together through both life's celebrations and life's losses.

Friends like Jack and Meryl remind me of the famous comment by poet George Eliot, "Oh, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away." In order to have friends like that, of course, we have to be a friend like that.

Our text in Romans is also about friendship. The 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans is Paul's farewell greeting as he concludes his letter to the church in Rome, most of whom he does not know, having not yet been to the city. In *The Message*, a paraphrase of Scripture, Paul's greeting goes like this:

<sup>3</sup> Say hello to Priscilla and Aquila, who have worked hand in hand with me in serving Jesus. <sup>4</sup> They once put their lives on the line for me. And I'm not the only one grateful to them. All the non-Jewish gatherings of believers also owe them plenty, <sup>5</sup> to say nothing of the church that meets in their house. Hello to my dear friend Epenetus. He was the very first Christian in the province of Asia. <sup>6</sup> Hello to Mary. What a worker she has turned out to be! <sup>7</sup> Hello to my cousins Andronicus and Junias. We once shared a jail cell. They were believers in Christ before I was. Both of them are outstanding leaders. <sup>8</sup> Hello to Ampliatus, my good friend in the family of God. <sup>9</sup> Hello to Urbanus, our companion in Christ's work, and my good friend Stachys.

<sup>10</sup> Hello to Apelles, a tried-and-true veteran in following Christ. Hello to the family of Aristobulus. <sup>11</sup> Hello to my cousin Herodion. Hello to those Christians from the family of Narcissus. <sup>12</sup> Hello to Tryphena and Tryphosa—such diligent women in serving the Master. Hello to Persis, a dear friend and hard worker in Christ. <sup>13</sup> Hello to Rufus—a good choice by the Master!—and his mother. She has also been a dear mother to me.

<sup>14</sup> Hello to Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and also to all of their families. <sup>15</sup> Hello to Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas—and all the Christians who live with them. <sup>16</sup> Holy embraces all around! All the churches of Christ send their warmest greetings!

There's a story attached to each of those names, and I had some experiences this week similar to these, about which I'll write in my *Laptop*; but for this morning I want to focus simply on the friendships we share in the Body of Christ, significant and world-changing friendships, even if few of them attain the level of "best friends." I've told you this story before, but I like it so well that I want to tell it again.

When Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor in the South Bronx, was a student at Brown University in the mid-seventies, she took a year off to volunteer with Rural Mission on Johns Island, South Carolina, just west of Charleston. Here's her favorite story from that year:

---

<sup>2</sup> Bob Greene, *And You Know You Should Be Glad: A True Story of Lifelong Friendship* (William Morrow, 2006).

“The most important lesson I learned on Johns Island was from Miss Ellie, who lived miles down a small dirt road in a one-room, wooden home. I loved to visit her. We’d sit in old rocking chairs on the front porch, drinking tall glasses of sweet tea, while she’d tell me stories punctuated with Gullah expressions that would leap from her river of thought like bright, silver fish: ‘Girl, I be so happy I could jump the sky!’ I never could find out Miss Ellie’s precise age, but it was somewhere between 90 and 100. Maybe she didn’t know herself. She still chopped her own firewood, stacked in neat little piles behind the house.

“Miss Ellie had a friend named Netta whom she’d known since they were small girls. In order to get to Netta’s house, Miss Ellie had to walk for miles through fields of tall grass. This was the sweet grass that Sea Island women make famous baskets out of, but it was also home to numerous poisonous snakes: coral snakes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and copperheads.

“Actually, Netta’s home was not that far from Miss Ellie’s place, but there was a stream that cut across the fields. You had to walk quite a distance to get to the place where it narrowed enough to pass. I admired Miss Ellie, who would set off to visit her friend full of bouncy enthusiasm, with no worry for the snakes or the long miles. I also felt sorry for her. Poor Miss Ellie, I thought, old and arthritic, having to walk all that way, pushing through the thick summer heat, not to mention the snakes.

“I felt sorry—until I hit upon the perfect plan. I arranged with some men to help build a simple plank bridge across the stream near Miss Ellie’s house. I scouted out the ideal place—not too wide, but too deep to cross. I bought and helped carry the planks there myself. Our bridge was built in a day. I was so excited that I could hardly wait to see Miss Ellie’s reaction. I went to her house, where she wanted to sit in her rocker and tell stories, but I was too impatient with my project. I practically dragged her off with me. ‘Look!’ I shouted, ‘a shortcut for you to visit Netta!’

“Miss Ellie’s face did not register the grateful, happy look I expected. There was no smile, no jumping the sky. Instead, for a long time, she looked puzzled, then she shook her head and looked at me as though I were the one who needed pity. ‘Child, I don’t need a shortcut.’ And she told about all the friends she kept up with on her way to visit Netta. A shortcut would cut her off from Mr. Jenkins, with whom she always swapped gossip; from Miss Hunter, who so looked forward to the quilt scraps she’d bring by; from the raisin wine she’d taste at one place in exchange for her biscuits; and the chance to look in on the ‘old folks’ who were sick.

“‘Child,’ she said again, ‘can’t take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don’t mix with love.’”<sup>3</sup>

Miss Ellie and Mr. Jenkins and Miss Hunter were probably the kind of friends to whom Paul sent greetings at the end of Romans. They were folks who’d shared a lot of life together, and that’s what God intends for us as sisters and brothers of our elder brother, Jesus.

Beyond the simple warmth of these stories, there are two things I hope you’ll take away from this message. The first take-away has to do with church friends in general.

As our motto affirms, people come to church for two primary reasons: to find **a Life that Matters**—significance in relationship to God’s purposes for our lives—and to find **Relationships that Last**—a community of deep friendships that can sustain our souls on life’s journey. Or to put it more simply, people generally come to church to find God and to find friends, with finding friends being more urgent most of the time. It is, after all, through each other that we frequently experience God’s most effective shaping in our lives.

---

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 16-17.

The thing to remember if you've been in this congregation for a while (and it's true for every congregation) is that, while you may have established a number of meaningful friendships that sustain and bless your life—and that's a very good thing indeed—the persons who sit near you in worship whom you don't really know are looking for the same thing. Our guests have come to worship with us for these same two reasons—to find God and to find friends—and it is our privilege and responsibility to help with that, just as others did for us at some time in the past.

Friendships can begin in this room, but they don't develop very far if this is where they stay. We need to watch for ways and to create ways in which deep friendships can take root and grow.

The other thing I hope you'll take away this morning is related but more specific. As we honor our high school graduates this morning, we need to consider ways to bless them and to stay in touch with them as their church family, and we need to think more deeply about developing friendships with persons in different generations than ourselves.

Students who graduate from high school, even those who've been active in youth ministry, become lost to the church in appalling numbers. Some research suggests that as many as 80 percent of church youth never really return to church after graduating from high school. One author suggested that a major reason why this may be true is that youth don't have relationships with anyone in the church except other youth and the youth workers, so when they leave the youth ministry and scatter to various colleges and careers, there are very few people in their home congregation whom they know and who are their friends. Where there are few friendship connections, there are . . . well, few connections.<sup>4</sup>

Those of us who are older and who prefer traditional to contemporary worship will do well to consider our commitments to our own young. We need to make time to worship with them. We need to go out of our way to meet them and to get to know them—that's the whole point of our intergenerational experiences such as last Wednesday's "Tech Night." We need to find ways to bless them and appreciate them, so they don't go looking for friends in the next chapter of their lives "in all the wrong places," like the characters in the TV show did.

Such concern has to do with "being the Body of Christ" as Paul talked much about in his letter to the Romans. The stretching you and I have to do to cross differences of age and worship styles is not nearly so great as was necessary in the early church as they built bridges across differences of Jewish and Gentile culture.<sup>5</sup> Paul spent several chapters in Romans addressing issues of differing eating habits and cultural customs and prohibitions, and he told the Christians in Rome "*Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. . . . Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other*" (Romans 12:9-10).

We have an opportunity to do this kind of stretching this very day. Immediately following this service, our youth are hosting a luncheon to raise funds for their summer mission activities. If you haven't been planning to attend, or didn't know about it until this morning, I challenge you to change your lunch plans to stay and encourage our young people. And I challenge you to sit with people you don't normally sit with, old or young, so that we can practice being the Body of Christ and maybe even add to our speed dial lists . . . right now!

---

<sup>4</sup> Joe Ball, "Lessons from a Hunter Education Course," *Western Recorder*, November 14, 2006, 5.

<sup>5</sup> J. Samuel Escobar, "Mission Fields on the Move," *Christianity Today*, May 2010, 31.