

“SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP” A meditation on 1 Samuel 20:1-4, 17

Lenten Meditation, Council of Churches, March 2, 2004, Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

There's a song many of you may know. It was written by Paul McCarthy, in 1967, for the "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" Album. It goes like this, "What would you do if I sang out of tune? Would you get up and walk out on me? Lend me your ears and I'll sing you a song and I'll try not to sing out of key. I get by with a little help from my friends ..." ... With a little help from my friends. This year, the theme for the Lenten series is spiritual friendship. This song is one of many that gets me to think about what a friend is for me.

What is a friend? A friend is someone who helps me get by. What is a spiritual friend? This is a friend that goes deeper, and helps me get by to another place ... a place closer to God. Friendship is a form of love. It has a divine inspiration that is profound. Friendship draws us nearer to others and to God. To be a friend of others is to be a friend of God.

In the 12th century, a Scottish Cisterian monk by the name of Aelred of Rievaulx addressed friendship. He wrote several books, "The Way of Friendship" and "Spiritual Friendship." As an abbot, Aelred tried to impress upon his monks the importance of friendship. He wanted his community of faith to embrace the idea of friendship, both human and divine. Aelred saw this friendship as personal and centered in Jesus Christ.

Aelred says that the word for friendship is rooted in love. The Latin word for love is amor. The word for friend is amicus. The word for friendship is amicitia. Thus Aelred leads us to understand how the word friend is grounded in love. One of his favorite passages of Holy Scripture is Proverbs 17:17: "A friend of loves at all times." Aelred considers friendship a Christian virtue worth pursuing. It has eternal worth and value.

In "Spiritual Friendship", Aelred notes there are three kinds of friendship. The first is carnal. This is the mutual harmony of common thieves. The goal of this friendship is vice. Aelred says the next kind of friendship is worldly. He explains that these are the friends who hope for gain. We might call these "fair weather" friends. You know who these people are don't you? Win the lottery and see how many "friends" appear! These are friends in name only. These are people who only want something from us.

Aelred spends most of his writing on the third kind of friendship, spiritual. These are the mutual friends in pursuit of the Holy. Spiritual friends have a similar life, common morals and a like faith. A spiritual friend exists for the other. They demonstrate self-giving concern and care for their friend. These friends live the command of Jesus to love one another.

True spiritual friendship is marked by honor and humility. It produces truth, good will, affection, joy ... and most of all, ACTION! Aelred says that spiritual friends temper adversity and moderate prosperity. When things are bad, these are the friends that stand by us. Spiritual friends hold our hands in the hospital, put their arm around us at the funeral and show up at our door with chicken soup and a warm smile when we are sick! They also are the friends that don't let us get full of ourselves in prosperity. Spiritual

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friends ground us and keep us from thinking that what we have is our own accomplishment.

What Aelred discovered is that happiness does not exist without friendship! Think about that for a moment. If we want to experience happiness, we need friends. He writes in “Spiritual Friendship”: “A friend,” says a wise man, “is the medicine of life!” Do you think we could use more of this kind of medicine right now? Spiritual friends bring a security, unity and openness not found in the rest of the world. These are the friends we can talk with, share our deepest concerns and most threatening fears. Spiritual friends commit to walk with us, pray with us and help us find our way to God.

Another wonderful aspect of Aelred’s writings is that such spiritual friendship is Christ centered. Jesus is part of every sermon he preaches. The Incarnation shows Aelred the way to friendship with God! The Crucifixion shows him the length to which Jesus goes for the love of his friends... and that’s you and me!

All this discussion brings us to the reading today. Here are Jonathan and David, the classical biblical example of spiritual friendship. Jonathan is the son of King Saul. There was no love lost between David and Saul. Saul had fallen out of favor with God. He had abandoned God. Here comes David, the anointed one who will succeed Saul. What we would imagine is that Jonathan would expect to become the next king. He had the rights of familial succession!

But into to story comes the realization that Jonathan has chosen David as a friend. He is not interested in power, status, prestige or wealth. He is faithful to his friend, David. The two of them make a covenant, a sacred pact before God to be friends. We see that Jonathan desires friendship more than anything else! He will sacrifice anything and everything, and does, for his friend. Jonathan defends and honors David. He seeks what is best for David, not himself! Here we have a glimpse of what it means to be a true friend. Jonathan and David are a prime example for Aelred and his monks of spiritual friendship. It is a model worthy of our attention today.

What are we to make of Jonathan, David and Aelred? They invite us to think about our own spiritual friends, and becoming spiritual friends for others. Who are our spiritual friends? Who truly cares about your faith and soul? These are people we need to identify. It is important that we cultivate these relationships. They are more precious than gold. We must sustain our relationships with spiritual friends.

Spiritual friendship is learning to share the love of Jesus Christ with one another. With whom can you honestly share both doubts and beliefs? Who would be willing to pray with you? Who will listen patiently with care and concern to you? Who would be willing to walk into the very face of evil with you? These are your spiritual friends.

And for whom are we willing to be a spiritual friend? Are we willing to listen, to encourage, to admonish, to pray, to act and to believe? A spiritual friend is one centered

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in Jesus who believes that we are called to love one another as we have been loved? For whom will you become a spiritual friend?

So we come to the end of this meditation today. We have been blessed with the example of Jonathan and David. We have the wisdom and insight of Aelred. We have the example of Jesus Christ. I began with a song, and I would like to send with one. I started out life a Methodist, and learned how to sing some good hymns. There is a 19th century hymn that reminds me where our spiritual friendship is rooted. Maybe you know it too, it goes like this, “What a friend I have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear ...”