

## “BACK TO SCHOOL: IV – FRIENDS”

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I Samuel 18:1-4

John 15:12-17

Well, here we are in the fourth week of this sermon series on back to school themes – and today we get to one of the greatest school things of all times – and it is friendship. For most of us, the first real friends we made in life were friends we made at school. I think back to my first years in school in Elkton, and it was then that I became friends with people like Denise Biles, Margy Husfelt and Sylvia Howes. The years went on, and at each different level of schooling, I made new friends – some were friends for those brief years of school together, others have remained friends for life.

When I think about school and friends, I always think about a group of people I heard about a number of years ago when I came back to Elkton – friends from their years at Elkton High School, which for them is now a long, long time ago. They call themselves “the Lunch Bunch” and they gather regularly for lunch together. They’ve been doing this for over 25 years!

Friends are gifts from God, and they are so important in our lives. In fact, our lives would be pretty empty without them. Friends are those who know us through and through, and love us, warts and all. They value the people we are, they affirm us and love us. They accept us as not being perfect. They are the people with whom we can take off our masks and be ourselves. And they are there when we need them.

Both scripture passages that we heard this morning are about friendship. The first, from the Hebrew scriptures, is a story of a strong and unlikely friendship, between Jonathan, son of King Saul, and David, son of Jesse. Why was it unlikely? Well, they actually should have been competitors for the throne, they actually should have been wary of each other. If you remember your Old Testament history, King Saul was threatened by young David. He was remarkably gifted, he slew that giant Goliath, and Saul could see the handwriting on the wall – that David would take his place one day – and he was not happy about that, and in fact, was out to get David. Which makes it all the more remarkable that it’s Saul’s son Jonathan who goes to David’s side!

Jonathan and David’s relationship bore all of the hallmarks of a good friendship – they admired each other, cared about each other, affirmed each other, were there for each other in good times and bad, even when it was risky and involved sacrifice. When Saul was going to go after David, it was Jonathan who

warned him to go away and be safe. When people would speak ill of David, it was Jonathan who spoke up for him. Theirs was a picture of a good and true friendship – they brought out the best in each other.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus paints a beautiful portrait of friendship as well, only he speaks of the length to which friends should be prepared to go for one another, to the point of giving up one's own life for one's friend.

Jesus himself had some very good friends. Surely the disciples were his friends. He chose them himself, and we know that they were very human, not perfect. And from them, there were three that seemed to be his closest friends – Peter, James and John.

He had others as well – his family, and then, the ones to whose house scripture tells us Jesus went regularly – Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Jesus, perfect though he was in every single way, still chose to include in his life friends, for they added so much. They were his companions and compatriots, the ones with whom he could relax and laugh, the ones to whom he could turn in times of trouble, the ones who had his back. They were the ones with whom he could be himself, and not on display, like he was for so much of his ministry. Jesus' friends made his life rich and bearable.

Friends – gifts from God who make our lives rich and bearable. They are so important – and so, my friends, it is important that we choose our friends well. When your kids went to school, isn't that something you told them? Choose your friends well! You didn't want them to hang around with the wrong kinds of kids – kids who would get them in trouble or lead them down the wrong path.

One pastor tells about how when he was pretty young, his best friend moved with his family away from Illinois to somewhere in the deep south. So periodically this pastor, while he was growing up, would go and stay with them for three or four days at a time. He always took his baseball mitt with him because he and his friend loved to play catch. And he said that every time he and his friend were about to leave for the park, the friend's father would say to them, with his deep Southern drawl, "Watch out who you hang with after the game boys, because stupid rubs off!" (Bill Hybels, *Simplify*, p. 172)

"Stupid rubs off!" That dad knew how easily those boys could be influenced by other kids to do stupid things, things they knew better than to do.

"Stupid rubs off!" You know, that's not a bad thing to remember when you're choosing friends, because you can so easily fall prey to doing things those around you do. For instance, as one author noted, "Perhaps you work in an environment where profanity flows like a polluted river all day, every day. Can profanity rub off? Or maybe you work in the financial services industry, where the whole game is making more money, no matter what it takes to get it. Can greed rub off? (he asks).

At parties where the main event is alcohol consumption, can over-drinking rub off?  
(Ibid)

Well, you see where he's going, and he's right. Things that others do around you, can rub off on you over time, influencing the way you act and the things you do. So, you see, we need to choose well, the people we call friends, and the situations we find ourselves in.

If you want to know who not to pick as friends, you need only to turn to the wisdom of Solomon, found in the sixth chapter of the Book of Proverbs. He says stay away from those who are prideful and arrogant – you know the ones who constantly compare themselves to others – “I matter, you don't. I'm sophisticated, you're plain. I'm educated, you're ignorant. I'm beautiful, you're average. I'm a career woman, you're a stay-at-home mom. I'm a businessperson, you're a laborer.” (Ibid). Well, you get the picture. Solomon says, these are not people you want as friends, because they will draw you into that comparing too, you'll find yourself judging people and thinking more highly of yourself than you ought.

He says, secondly, to stay away from dishonest people. Oh, it's easy to stay away from those who are known to be outright liars, but be wary, he says of those who slant the truth, to tell little white lies all the time. They are just as dangerous.

Other things Solomon warns about are mean-spiritedness, lack of integrity, gossip, and divisiveness. Don't choose those kinds of people as friends, because they will only pull you in those directions, to do those same things – and, in the process, pull you away from being Christlike.

Instead, when choosing friends, look for people who bear the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Those are the kind of people who will add so much to your life, and will draw out the best in you, urging you to better, more Christlike living as well.

As I did research for this sermon this week, I read so many stories of wonderful friendships, and they were not just syrupy sweet stories, but stories of what friendship really looks like.

One of them reminded me that friends stand up for each other. It was actually a baseball story from long ago, a story involving the first African American major league ball player, Jackie Robinson. As you probably know, it was rough going for him when he started to play. He was jeered at every stadium around the country. One day, when he was playing in his home stadium in Brooklyn, Jackie made an error. The fans began to ridicule him. He stood at second base, with his head down, despondent over his error, despondent over the continuing humiliating ways he was being treated. All of a sudden, he looked up and shortstop Pee Wee Reese came over to him, stood next to him, put his arm around Robinson's shoulder and looked up at the crowd – and the crowd went silent, the jeering stopped. And you know what? Robinson later said that that arm around his shoulder saved his

career. That's what friends do. Friends stand up for each other, and fight for each other, and affirm each other. They have your back. (Sermonillustrations.com)

A second story happened in a restaurant in Germany. A man and his sister had gone on a tour of Europe after he graduated from college, and one night went to this dinner. What you need to know about this man is that he was very insecure, and very tough on himself. And that night he spilled something on the table. Well, he began to berate himself. "Why do I have to be so stupid, so clumsy? I always embarrass myself. Everybody must think I'm a stupid fool!" Now, what do you think his sister did? Reassured him, told him not to worry about it. No. That's not what she did.

What she did was, after he said, "Everybody must think I'm a stupid fool," she said, "That's right Bruce. Everybody here has nothing better to do than to think about you. The moment you walked in they all stopped eating to watch you make a mistake. Do you really think they have nothing better to do? Are you so important that you think they are all watching you? Maybe you are not that important. I think you are taking yourself too seriously."

Now, you may think that was a bit harsh, but it was exactly what that man needed, and he said her words opened up his eyes in a big way. She helped him gain perspective in a way that changed his life.

You see, she was a good friend, because good friends help you be the best you can be. They challenge you, but they do it to make you better. They can challenge you, because they trust in the strength of your relationship. (On-line, "The Influence of Friends")

Finally, a story about the power of friends just being there. The late, great priest and writer Henri Nouwen wrote about a day "that a friend came to me and told me that his wife had left him that day. He sat in front of me, tears streaming from his eyes. I didn't know what to say. There simply was nothing to say. My friend didn't need words. What he needed was simply to be with a friend. I held his hands in mine, and we sat there . . . silently. For a moment, I wanted to ask him how and why it had all happened, but I knew that this was not the time for questions. It was the time just to be there as friends who have nothing to say, but are not afraid to remain silent together. Today, when I think of that day, I feel a deep gratitude that my friend had entrusted his grief to me." (Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now, Spiritual Literacy*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, eds., p. 458)

Oh friends, if you have a true friend, you know one of the best things about that friendship is that you can be silent together, you don't have to explain things, or question things, you can just be together, supporting one another.

Friends are such a gift from God. Choose them well, for they will serve you well all the days of your life. Choose friends who will bring out the best in you, who will hold you up, not bring you down. You know, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, took a vow, when he was a young student at Christ Church, Oxford,

that he would only choose friends that would help him on the road to heaven. Not a bad way to go, huh?

I want to close by telling you something really interesting I discovered this week. One author wrote this definition of friendship: “to know and to be known.” (Hybels) Does that remind you of anything? Like our church mission statement? “To know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and make Him known to others.”

What better way for us to remember that our first, last and best friend in life is Jesus Himself! He chose you from the beginning, and only asks that you choose Him as well. He, indeed, is the One who loves you best; who accepts you just as you are, but invites you to even more; who supports you in all the times of your life; who challenges you to make you better; who is a silent and steady presence every moment of every day. Jesus is our first, last and best friend – our perfect gift from God.

So, my friends, with Jesus as your guide, choose your friends well, for they will serve you well all the days of your life, they will help you be the best you you can be, and will help make your life complete. Thanks be to God for the gift of friends, and thanks be to God especially for our first, last and best friend, Jesus.

Amen.