A Covenant between Friends

Summer Quarter: Living in Covenant
Unit 3: Covenant: A Personal Perspective

Sunday school lesson for the week of August 4, 2019
By Rev. Ashley Randall

Lesson Scripture: 1 Samuel 18:1-5; 19:1-7
Key Verse: 1 Samuel 18:1

Purpose: To understand how God’s covenant love shapes and transforms our friendship with others

A mirror to reflect your soul

It is rare for a week to go by and not get a “friend request” on Facebook. Most days Facebook includes a post on my feed of “People You May Know.” I can click a button and add a friend (or at least invite them to be my friend). Most of the suggested new friends are on the list because we already share some number of mutual friends. I currently have more than 900 friends on Facebook. I could tell you the exact number, but it will probably change before the day is over. With a little bit of effort, I guess I could push that number over 1,000.

Several years ago, when Facebook was first becoming popular, I remember having a conversation with a friend who I had recently “liked.” He wondered what it meant that we had moved from being actual friends to being virtual friends. Was that a good thing?

It turns out that quite a few people have pondered that question, many of them academics. If they have contributed anything to the discussion, it has been more confusion. Maria Konnikova, New York Times best-selling author, journalist, and professional poker player, offers this explanation:

*The key to understanding why reputable studies are so starkly divided on the question of what Facebook does to our emotional state may be in simply looking at what people actually do when they’re on Facebook.... When people engaged in direct interaction with others – that is, posting on walls, messaging, or “liking” something – their feelings of bonding and general social capital increased, while their sense of loneliness decreased. But when participants simply consumed a lot of content passively, Facebook had the opposite effect, lowering their feelings of connection and increasing their sense of loneliness.*

Aristotle was not only one of the first people to write about three kinds of love—eros, agape, and philia; he also wrote about three categories of friendship: of pleasure, of utility, and of virtue. In friendships of pleasure, you and another person are friends because you entertain each other or enjoy doing activities together. Friendships of utility are those in which you gain some tangible benefit from the relationship. The benefit could be social, political, or economic.
Exploitation of the other people is not necessarily implied, because the advantage can be reciprocal and because the direct benefit doesn’t preclude having genuine feelings of affection for each other. For Aristotle, however, the highest kind of friendship was one of virtue: you are friends with someone because you admire their character traits – the virtues they demonstrate in their daily living. Being their companion challenges you to live a better life. In her book, “Answers for Aristotle,” CUNY philosophy professor Massimo Pigliucci writes:

Aristotle’s opinion was that friends hold a mirror up to each other; through that mirror they can see each other in ways that would not otherwise be accessible to them, and it is this (reciprocal) mirroring that helps them improve themselves as persons. Friends, then, share a similar concept of eudaimonia [Greek for “having a good demon,” often translated as “happiness”] and help each other achieve it. So it is not just that friends are instrumentally good because they enrich our lives, but that they are an integral part of what it means to live the good life.

In his book, “Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words,” David Whyte picks up on Aristotle’s suggestion that friends help us see ourselves more clearly, and adds the element of forgiveness. Whyte writes:

Friendship is a mirror to presence and a testament to forgiveness. Friendship not only helps us see ourselves through another’s eyes, but can be sustained over the years only with someone who has repeatedly forgiven us for our trespasses as we must find it in ourselves to forgive them in turn. A friend knows our difficulties and shadows and remains in sight, a companion to our vulnerabilities more than our triumphs, when we are under the strange illusion we do not need them. An undercurrent of real friendship is a blessing exactly because its elemental form is rediscovered again and again through understanding and mercy. All friendships of any length are based on a continued, mutual forgiveness. Without tolerance and mercy all friendships die.

John O’Donohue is another writer who borrows Aristotle’s notion of friendship and stretches it to a more expansive understanding. In his book, “Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom,” he writes,

A friend is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.... The one you love, your anam cara, your soul friend, is the truest mirror to reflect your soul. The honesty and clarity of true friendship also brings out the real contour of your spirit.

Such honesty and clarity are truly transformative – even transcendent – as it awakens and fosters a deep and special companionship. O’Donohue writes:

In this love, you are understood as you are without mask or pretension. The superficial and functional lies and half-truths of social acquaintance fall away, you can be as you really are. Love allows understanding to dawn, and understanding is precious. Where you are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging. When you really feel understood, you feel free to release yourself into the trust and shelter of the other person’s soul... This art of love
discloses the special and sacred identity of the other person. Love is the only light that can truly read the secret signature of the other person’s individuality and soul. Love alone is literate in the world of origin; it can decipher identity and destiny.

How would you describe a true friend? How important are honesty and forgiveness in sustaining true friendship?

A Friendship Begins  
1 Samuel 18:1-5

According to Jim Henson, “There’s not a word yet for old friends who’ve just met.” “Soul friend” may come close, but it still doesn’t fully explain or describe how Jonathan moves so quickly to make a covenental commitment to David – a commitment that Jonathan takes more seriously than his commitment to his father, King Saul. How does one make sense of this deep affection between a prince and a shepherd? Perhaps if we pull back a bit and take a longer view of what leads up to this we can find some clues to why these two young men form such a strong and enduring commitment to one another.

Many continuing dramas on television provide their fans with a quick review of what has come before: “Previously on ….” It serves both as a reminder of what you should already know and also a clue to what you should expect as the story unfolds in its next episode. So, let’s back up a bit to see what we can learn about these two that might explain their uncommon bond.

Immediately preceding their formal introduction to each other, we have the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). David – sent by his father with supplies for his brothers who have been conscripted into Saul’s army – hears the champion of the Philistines taunt: “Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man that we may fight together” (1 Samuel 17:10). David is amazed that no one has taken up the challenge – especially when he learns that the king has offered a great reward to whoever defeats this giant.

David’s oldest brother, Eliab, is annoyed that David is exploring the possibility of going into battle with this Philistine, but David will not be dissuaded. He continues to inquire until he gets the attention of Saul. When David appears before Saul, he volunteers to enter the battle. Saul questions David’s age and experience. David testifies that he has faced ferocious wild animals while guarding his family’s sheep. “‘The Lord,’ David added, ‘who rescued me from the power of both lions and bears, will rescue me from the power of this Philistine’” (1 Samuel 17:37). In the face of such confidence, Saul commissions David to take the fight to the enemy.

Once David confronts Goliath face to face, this fierce warrior appears to be amused by such a slight opponent, armed only with a staff and a sling. Once again David testifies to his faith in God:
But David told the Philistine, “You are coming against me with sword, spear, and scimitar, but I come against you in the name of the Lord of heavenly forces, the God of Israel’s army, the one you’ve insulted. Today the Lord will hand you over to me. I will strike you down and cut off your head! Today I will feed your dead body and the dead bodies of the entire Philistine camp to the wild birds and the wild animals. Then the whole world will know that there is a God on Israel’s side. And all those gathered here will know that the Lord doesn’t save by means of sword and spear. The Lord owns this war, and he will hand all of you over to us.” (1 Samuel 17:45-47)

David loads his sling with one of the five smooth stones he has collected, lets it fly, strikes Goliath in the forehead, and brings him to the ground. David runs and stands over the fallen warrior, grabs Goliath’s sword, and separates his head from his body.

Saul asks the commander of his army, Abner, “Whose son is this young man?” Abner doesn’t know, so Saul sends Abner to find out. Abner brings David back to Saul, and with the severed head of the Philistine in his hand, they have short conversation about David’s father, Jesse of Bethlehem.

It is reasonable to assume that Jonathan has been with his father, King Saul, throughout this episode. He has heard David’s testimony concerning his time of watching over his father’s sheep. He has heard David’s response to Goliath’s taunts and personal attacks. He has witnessed David’s skill and boldness in battle. And he has seen David’s humble confidence as he stood before the king with his enemy’s head in his hand. It is immediately following this conversation, that “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Samuel 18:1).

Still we are left with the question of why all of this led Jonathan to make such a commitment to David. To find the answer, let’s back up a little further in the story.

In 1 Samuel 14 we find an episode in the life of Jonathan that reveals much about his character, his values, and his faith in God. Even a quick examination of this story may help us see some of the common interests, beliefs, and values that account for deep consonance that forms the basis for the special friendship of Jonathan and David.

Saul has been proclaimed king and he has experienced some success in battle, particularly against the Ammonites. However, the Philistines have been making life difficult for the Israelites: restricting their access to weapons, while sending raining parties into their villages.

One day Jonathan decides that enough is enough. Without telling his father, he comes up with a plan to test the vulnerability of a nearby Philistine garrison. “Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will act for us; for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few” (1 Samuel 14:6).
Jonathan’s armor-bearer agrees that it is worth a try. Jonathan sets some conditions to determine whether he should proceed. When he receives what he had decided would be confirmation for an attack, he and his armor bearer experience remarkable success. “In that first slaughter Jonathan and his armor-bearer killed about twenty men within an area about half a furrow long in an acre of land” (1 Samuel 14:14). Jonathan’s success sparks panic among the enemy which attracts the attention of Saul’s army who join the battle, and rout the Philistines. “So the Lord gave Israel the victory that day” (1 Samuel 14:23).

Notice that neither Jonathan nor David are afraid to enter into battle against their enemies. Both of them trust the Lord to guide and protect them. Neither of them feel the need to get the approval of others before they move ahead with their plan. They are confident that as long as they are in alignment with God’s plan, they will experience success.

*To what extent do common interests, beliefs, and values affect the depth of your friendships? What interests, beliefs, and values lead to the most committed friendships?*

**A Friendship Tested**

1 Samuel 19:1-7

Following David’s success in battle against Goliath, Saul is initially pleased with David’s ability. Saul places David in charge of the army, and soon all of Israel is celebrating David’s success. Soon Saul is seething with rage. Saul is angry that David seems to be getting more acclaim than he. He begins to see David as a threat and devises several different schemes to eliminate David as a rival.

When his schemes fail, Saul decides to include Jonathan in his plans to kill David. Rather than support his father – and his king – Jonathan warns David about Saul’s murderous intentions and elects to speak directly to his father on David’s behalf.

To understand why Jonathan would be willing to place himself in such jeopardy, let’s return to the episode we were considering in chapter 14.

Now Saul committed a very rash act on that day. He had laid an oath on the troops, saying, “Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies.” So, none of the troops tasted food. (1 Samuel 14:24)

As it so happened, during the course of the battle, the troops came upon a honeycomb dripping with honey. They were tempted to take some nourishment, but they were afraid because of Saul’s oath. Jonathan had not been there when Saul made the oath. He was already engaged in the battle he had initiated. Unaware of the oath, he dipped his spear in the honey, put it in his mouth, and immediately felt refreshed. At that point, one of the soldiers told him about his father’s oath. Jonathan expresses his frustration with his father’s poor judgement. The battle continues, but it is not a definitive victory.
Saul looks for direction about how to proceed. He is hoping for an assurance from God that continuing to pursue his enemy will bring complete victory. After failing to get an answer, “Saul said, ‘Come here, all you leaders of the people, and let us find out how this sin has arisen today. For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, even if it is in my son Jonathan, he shall surely die!’” (1 Samuel 14:38-39a).

Through a series of selections, it is determined that Jonathan is, in fact, responsible for the transgression. He confesses, “I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand; here I am, I will die” (1 Samuel 14:43b). Saul seems determined to execute his son, but the people appeal on Jonathan’s behalf.

Then the people said to Saul, “Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today.” So the people ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die. (1 Samuel 14:45)

Jonathan has been on the receiving end of his father’s rash decisions. Others have been an advocate for him. He knows that his father can be – and oftentimes needs to be – led to see things more clearly.

*When has a difficult life experience helped you have a deeper empathy for a friend who is experiencing distress? How have you been empowered to support them through a time of trial?*

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