

Indispensable Wit(h)nesses: You Need a Friend
I Samuel 20:1-11; 18-42
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Politicians almost always get a bad rap these days, often with good reason. But one politician was exceptional: Sam Rayburn: Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas during the 1940's and 1950's. The story is told that the teenage daughter of a friend of his died suddenly one night. Early the next morning the man heard a knock on his door, and when he opened it, there was Mr. Rayburn standing outside. The Speaker said, "I just came by to see what I could do to help." The father replied in his deep grief, "I don't think there is anything you can do, Mr. Speaker. We are making all the arrangements." "Well," Mr. Rayburn said, "have you had your coffee this morning?" The man replied that they hadn't taken time for breakfast. So Mr. Rayburn said that he could at least make coffee for them. While he was working in the kitchen, the man came in and said, "Mr. Speaker, I thought you were supposed to be having breakfast at the White House this morning."

"I was," Mr. Rayburn answered, "but I called the President and told him I had a friend who was in trouble, and I couldn't come."¹

Oh, how we could all use a Mr. Rayburn or a Jonathan, who'd fall on a sword for us, if they could!

When it comes to friendship and sacrifice Jonathan sets the mold. We're not just talking "best buds" here, though Jonathan and David were obviously this! We're talking about Jonathan getting caught between his father, King Saul, and his friend David, whom Saul

was insanely jealous of. As Saul's son, Jonathan is Crown Prince of Israel. Saul even tells him he will be a victim of David's rise when David becomes king instead of him! But this is no "fair weather" friendship between Jonathan and David. They aren't friends for a season or a reason, but for a lifetime. Jonathan helps David escape his father's jealousy, warning him of Saul's plan to kill him, even though Jonathan knows good and well David's rise to power will mean losing his chance to be king. In the struggle between Saul and David, Jonathan chose his friend and obedience to God's will. Do we have a Jonathan in our lives or a Ruth, whose loyalty and friendship to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi is the stuff of legend? As Ruth says, "*Entreat me not to leave you! Where you go I shall go; your people my people; your God my God?*" Are we such a friend to others?

It's sad but a lot of folks are friendless. A study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, released in June of 2006, revealed that Americans have fewer people they can confide in than past generations. In 1985, the average American had 3 people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. In 2004, that number dropped to 2. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004.² One newspaper columnist claims, "The typical male idea of a best friend is 'someone they haven't seen for ten years.'"³

In this respect I'm deeply fortunate. Almost every year for 30 years I've been cycling with my friend Joe Culpepper. We know each other's moves so well we actually cycle and think in sync. This is especially true when we draft off each other's rear wheel;

where one mistake by the leader can cause the drafter, the follower, to go down quickly into a heap.

My friendship to Joe is symbolized by an incident while cycling the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. A swarm of flies flew into our draft and stayed there in mid-air, between us, for two miles. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I'd never have believed it. On that day, as on so many days, Joe and I and nature were in perfect shalom, perfect harmony. I know Joe is my Jonathan. He would fall on a sword for me, as I hope I would for him.

But, friendships aren't easy to come by or to sustain for any of us. Lots of obstacles stand in the way of being and having a true friend. In this narcissistic society of ours it's easy to limit ourselves to one question: "What's in it for me?" Many are so self-absorbed they have no room for friends. Their favorite pronoun is "I." Like Teddy Roosevelt, they act as though they're "the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral."

But as preacher Rick Warren warns in his very first sentence in *The Purpose Driven Life*, "It's not about you." And it isn't! As one who can be narcissistic with the worst of them, I'm happiest when I think first of others.

I especially like what preacher Peter Gomes says about friendship: "The search for friendship is a defense against an anonymous and indifferent world. It is our chance, our hope, to make something more of our time here than mere survival or existence, and that is why the gift of friendship is so great a gift from God. The risks are worth taking because the prospect of the alternative is too grim even to think about."⁴

But many people decide it's not worth the risk. They've been burned, abandoned or betrayed, and they're afraid to let themselves be hurt again. Some are afraid to let others

see beyond their façade to their pain and their dark side. They're afraid to let their shadow be exposed. Many just don't want to make the sacrifices friendship requires; because there is no friendship without grief. Not the grief over death, but the grief of putting up with another's expectations and annoying ways. Proverbs⁵ says, "*A friend loves at all times.*" Not as sycophants, always telling people what they want to hear, but through good times and hard times. As Leonard Sweet says,

A Jonathan is loyal even when you make it hard to be loyal.

A Jonathan walks with you in all seasons, like the winter of your discontent.

A Jonathan has seen you naked, in all your treachery and leachery, at your most heinous and most luminous, and loves you anyway.

A Jonathan grants you grace when you take him or her for granted.

A Jonathan defends your life's meaning, when your life has no meaning.

But most of all, a Jonathan sacrifices himself for you, even knowing, as the original Jonathan knew, that the more your song rises, the more his or her own song fades into the background.⁶

Author and journalist Bob Greene, who wrote about the Canteen in North Platte tells this story of friendship of one of his childhood pals:

“When, during an already painful juncture in my life, my wife died, I was so numb that I felt dead myself. In the hours after her death, as our children and I tried in vain to figure out what to do next, the phone rang. It was one of the mornings when you awaken, blink to start the day. It was Jack.

I didn’t want to hear any voice—even his voice. I just wanted to cover myself with darkness. I knew he 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 said. He had heard; he had flown in. “I know you probably don’t want to see anyone,” he said. “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 it. He knew the best thing he could do was to be present in the same town; to tell me he was there. And he did just sit there—I assume he watched TV, or did some work, but he waited until I gathered the strength to say I needed him. He helped me with things no man ever wants to need help with; mostly he sat with me and knew I did not require conversation, did not welcome chatter, did not need anything beyond the knowledge he was there. He brought food for my children and, by sharing my silence; he got me through those days.⁷

Friendship requires the kind of sacrifice and divine-like presence of Bob Greene’s friend. But this is just the way it is with real Jonathans, true friends. They intuit Jesus is right, “*Greater love has no one than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*”

¹Charles L. Allen, *Perfect Peace*, (1979), pp. 137-8 as found in *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories...* Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000, p. 327

²Janet Kornblum, "Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One To Confide In," *USA Today* (6-23-06) as found in *PreachingToday.com*

³Leonard Sweet, *11 Indispensible Relationships You Can't Be Without*, David C. Cook, 2008, p. 55.

⁴Peter Gomes, "Friendships," *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, SF: Harper, 1998, p. 146

⁵Prov. 17:17

⁶Sweet, *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

⁷Bob Greene, *And You Know You Should Be Glad: A True Story of Lifelong Friendship* (William Morrow, 2006) as found in *PreachingToday.com*