

"THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP .

Text 1: "And David lamented over Jonathan, his friend, saying, 'Very pleasant you have been to me, your love for me was wonderful, passing the love of women.'"

II Samuel 1:17, 26

Text 2: "You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants; but I have called you friends, for everything I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you."

John 15:14-15

Rev. Richard M. Cromie, Ph. D., D.D.
Sharon Presbyterian Church
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Back when our daughters were young, I was actually quite helpful around the house. Now I mainly take out the rubbish. But I used to paint rooms, did repairs, created items in my

wood-shop: like a Sewing Cabinet which by now is a priceless antique. I made Christmas presents for friends and family, like knick knack shelves, spoon holders and such-like. One spring, which brings my carpentry to this sermon, I decided to amuse our little girls by making mini-household items for them to play with, a child-sized sink and stove, a little barn etc.

Latter, after we moved into a new neighborhood, I decided to build a little grocery store in our basement for us to play in. It was complete with store-front, shelves for canned goods, even a little directional sign to point the customers to the correct area. MommaCrome cooperated fully by supplying items from the family larder. As we stood there admiring my handiwork, I guess I was feeling some fatherly pride at how creative I was, I could tell that they liked the mini- market, but after looking it over a couple of times, one daughter turned to me and asked expectantly, "But now Dad, can you make me some children to play with?" Hmmm, can you make me some people to play with? The loveliest playroom in the world isn't worth a farthing, unless there is someone there to share it with.

The same holds true when you roll the clock ahead a couple or four decades and transfer the setting into adulthood. I used to warn couples on their wedding day as Willie sings: "It's Funny How Time Slips Away!" I told one of our daughters and her groom to watch out: "You will turn around twice, and you'll be 62", the age I was then. My father-in-law smiled at me later and said, "That's right, Rich, and turn around one more time, and you'll be 92," the age he was then. You can have all the fancy grownup toys in the world: cars, homes, Country Clubs, stocks fund, with plenty enough to spare, but if you don't have someone to enjoy it with, it isn't worth a farthing.

It has always been that way. Back at the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, Adam had his whole world filled with things, but he was lonely. Cain was lonely and afraid out to the East. Abraham was lonely up on Mt. Moriah, Moses on Sinai, Ezekiel looking down into the Valley. Simon Peter was alone on that cold and trying night in the Courtyard, as Paul was in his prison begging Timothy to come to visit before it was too late. Martha was lonely busying herself with the household chores, and Mary was so lonely for someone to talk to, she sat right down and forgot about Martha. The Elder brother was lonely out on the farm, just as much as his little brother was in the far off country. John was lonely out on Patmos. Even Jesus got lonely.

And it is still true. There are all kinds of loneliness. It is the other name of a host of

emptiness. Every wife knows what it is when her husband refuses to talk to her, or to listen for her inner response. It gets worse, as we were reading this past week, when the husband deceives her and dallies with another woman. Husband knows loneliness when their wives carve out a world of their own while he was occupied at work. Every widow knows it as she tries to reshuffle the facets of her former life, each widower too. Divorced people know it, whatever was the cause of the separation. Students away at college know it, and those who are called to work in a new city know loneliness too.

Chaim Potok, the master Jewish novelist wrote in the opening line of one of his novels: "All beginnings are hard, especially the ones you make by yourself." They are. And never be misled, little children know it, too. We assign their restlessness and ennui to growing up. It is, but it is more than that. Teenagers know it too, as they search around for friends and values when life begins to turn the long corner into what we call adulthood.

Some are too proud to admit it, or perhaps they do not know even know it: too wedded to their self sufficiency. They would never admit it out loud. Well, let me say it for you, or at least offer it as a proposition for you to think about: Maybe you are lonely and you need to have and be a friend. You are lonely if you cannot abide that someone else might know as much as you. You are lonely if you insist on the last word, all the time. You are lonely if your life overflows with negativity. You're lonely if you drive too fast, or drink too much, or work too hard, or eat too much, or complain too much, or demand too much of those who love you. You're lonely if you stomp around and refuse to share your life with one who loves you.

Sure, life is a gyp at times, and things go wrong. Everybody know that - what else is new? Nobody gets what they want all the time. Life promises more than it delivers. Will Rogers used to quip, "And the proof is - that not one of us comes out of it alive." You're lonely if you eyes are always gazing over the horizon at some expected treasure which you will never find. You are lonely if you are blaming others for what life has given you. You're lonely if you are always taking and seldom giving, if your defenses are always up. You're lonely if your search for intimacy never finds its destination, if you cannot manage to carry on an in-depth relationship for long enough to make it make a difference in your life. You are lonely if you cannot live on love. And William Morrison's famous line comes back: "If you cannot live on love, you should die in a ditch!" In this whole ennui of things, call it what you will, I call it loneliness.

The Beatles had a famous song called, "Eleanor Rigby." Most of you will remember it:

Ah, look at all the lonely people.

Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been

Lives in a dream

Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door

Who is it for?

Father McKenzie writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear

No one comes near.

Look at him working.

Darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there

What does he care?

All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

All the lonely people

Where do they all belong?

Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name

Nobody came.

Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave

No one was saved

All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

Loneliness can kill you. Dr. James Lynch wrote a book called: "The Broken Heart: Medical Consequences of Loneliness." You might not want to read it, for it will scare you. After decades of research and thousands of recorded interviews, Dr. Lynch passed along his findings. He says that one way to state the underlying cause of depression and illness and accidents and alcoholism and cardio-vascular incidents and family troubles and divorce - even suicide - the number one cause is loneliness.

Sure, you are probably whispering to yourself that he over-simplifies the matter. It might even make you wince. For obviously there are a myriad of other causes when things go wrong. But, if you catch the drift, what he is saying is that these worrisome abnormalities and illnesses appear more often with those who are lonely. It is hard to quantify who and what loneliness is I know, but for a start, Lynch says that those who are divorced or widowed or unattached - those who are socially isolated for whatever reason - are three to five times more likely to be troubled by cardio-vascular incidents and cancer and some or all of the above problems. Loneliness can kill you.

More, it can kill a ton of other people too. It stills the enthusiasm of youth. It tears marriages and families apart. It can steal away the possibility of joy. It suffocates the spirit of a growing child or teen. It can thwart the grandest plans to make a life worthwhile. It can cause enormous disappointment, when there is no cause in sight. It can reverse the plans of churches and communities. Loneliness can kill you.

I learned it early in my ministry. I stumbled into a huge downtown church where the heartbreaks of God's children took me by surprise. Up until that time I had lived a modest sheltered life. I was amazed. I could not figure out why people with brains and skills and faith and money could not carve out a happy life. Why people do what they do continues to perplex me. How people become their own worst enemies is a puzzle. The man I mention in this sermon had just recently retired as Chairman of a major corporation. Something happened in the following months, as his wife decided to try some new thing. (That was the early 1960s when a host of people were trying to find themselves.) She left their home and his fortune behind.

Pity her too, having lived a half-lie for 37 years. He was so struck down and was falling further when I became his pastor. And I watched it happen: he went from looking pale, to being and disinterested, to being hospitalized for an irregular heart-beat, on to depression. The Medical charts and tests kept coming back negative. One day in the hospital, as I was praying for his healing, he told me meekly that he decided he did not want to live anymore. I asked "Why?" He didn't seem to know. But he died within two months. I asked his closest friend what happened. He said, "I'm not sure, but I think he died of a broken heart. Loneliness killed him."

The antidote to this meandering journey is what our sermon today calls, "The Gift of Friendship." Friendship, like love, is a gift. It is the most precious gift of all. But, like any meaningful gift, it demands care and concern. For everything you get in things like cars and houses and electronic equipment all the way up to homes and jobs and marriages and children, you assume an obligation to take care of it.

I often check up on the couples I marry during the first few months, even years. One time I called a young woman on about her second anniversary. "How are things going" I said? She said "Fine." "Any problems I should know about?" "No", she said, "only all this darn silver

service Grandma gave to us for our wedding present has caused us a lot of trouble. We had to add a ton of insurance. Then we had to buy a cabinet to store it in. And worst of all, I have to spend hours polishing the stuff every time we want to use it! I never knew it would be such a problem." I said quietly, "Well, why don't you give it back?" She snapped, "Oh, I would never do that Rev. It's worth a fortune." I said "Touché." And she smiled. And I was thinking, for everything you get, you receive the obligation to take care of it - everything, if you want to keep it and enjoy it demands your concentration. You have to work like that on friendship too.

Think for a moment about the friends you have, or had, those you have lost to neglect or anger or to death. How did it happen that out of the thousands of people you have come across through the years that you ended up with the friends you have? How did an apparently incidental or casual moment turn into a deep and abiding friendship? How is it that one moment, across a crowded room, or one enchanted evening, some day, hour or year at school - anywhere-everywhere-somewhere, someone you had never met before became a part of your life for evermore? Was it delivered in the time and providence of God, by fate or time, by your need, or theirs? Or was it just a random accident, a happenstance meeting in which you got lucky? Or could it have been as simple and as complicated as a gift of God.

I almost always ask couples who meet with me to talk about their marriages how they came to meet each other. What drew you to each other? How did it happen that you married this one person, out of all the others you might have chosen? What need dominated the decision? It is usually significant how a couple met and how they came to marry each other. (It is also significant how they lose or walk away from that original commitment.) How did you become friends? Psychologists try to dig down to the bottom of it, to help us understand why it is that certain personalities seem to be attracted to other ones. I might add that it is a life-long study. I am still learning.

But it is not marriage I am speaking of, it is the gift of friendship. It must be given. You cannot command someone to be your friend. Try to force someone to love you. When I was a teen - I still remember. I used to waste a lot of time and prayers asking God to tell Phyllis Sagoli or in turn Jeannie Davis to like me. Neither ever did. But that didn't stop me; I kept on praying. You cannot coerce someone to like you, if they don't. There is the mystery in how people become friends. I call it a miracle. First of all, friendship is a gift.

Like any gift, you should receive friendship with humility and grace. It is the most precious gift in all the world: as meaningful as faith, as expressive as hope, parallel to love. When St. Paul lined up the greatest gifts of all, he said, "The greatest one is love." And yet, I see people throw away friendship over the most trivial of troubles.

Emily Dickinson said, "Be a friend and the rest will follow." Alexander Pope added, "My friend is not perfect, but neither am I, so we are meant for each other." And W. H. Auden wrote, "You must learn to love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart!" You must!

Now back to the Bible. Mostly the Old Testament warns against deceptive friends. Wisdom literature says to watch out for those who pretend to be your friends and really aren't. Bad experiences with supposedly reliable friends can break your heart.

There are a few examples of good friends: Ruth and Naomi were the best of friends. Elijah and Elisha, Rachel and Jacob, Hosea and Gomer, most of the time. The best and noblest is the story of David and Jonathan. If ever two young men were destined to be friends, you would not have chosen them. Jonathan, the son of King Saul, lived in the Royal Palace. The other was a little shepherd boy who took care of his father's sheep, the baby in a poor family down in Bethlehem. What's more, Jonathan was heir to the throne of Saul. David was heir to nothing.

Meantime, Samuel at the call of God went out and anointed David to be the future King. The father of Jonathan hated David, even before that. But, in God's time, when it all was said and done, David was called of God to move into the slot that Jonathan would have had. Poor Jonathan was killed in battle alongside his father. And a messenger brought the good news to David: "We won; our side was victorious! Isn't it wonderful? Jonathan is gone and you can have his throne!" But David lamented and wept. The love of a friend is worth more than all the kingdoms in the world. He said, "Lo, how the mighty are fallen! Dear Jonathan, in life and in death we are not divided. I am distressed. Very pleasant have you been to me. Your love to me is greater than the love of a woman." Nothing erotic intended there, but the most precious thing I had in all the world was your friendship. Now it's gone. Will I ever recover? I would trade my kingdom for my friend.

In the New Testament, there are also warnings about friends who will deceive you. But it lands on the positive. Look at our text in John 15: "This is my commandment," Jesus says,

"that you love one another as I have loved you. It is not an option. It is a command. We don't have the privilege of going around deciding who we will love and who we will not. Not if Jesus Christ is your Lord.

He goes on, "Greater love has no one than this that you lay down your life for one another." Love one another as I have loved you! Totally, without counting the cost. "I now call you friends." Jesus adds, "You are not longer servants who do not know what the Master is doing." (John 15:15)

Bultmann wrote in his Commentary on John: "The love of Jesus is not a personal emotion, not a time to revel in how much Jesus loves me, and how safe I am in his loving arms. (Although we are.) "The response to Jesus' love is not a mystical or pietistic intimacy with Christ (as so many brag about how much they love Jesus.) but it is in the laying down of one's life for others that it takes its richest meaning." (Commentary on John, Interpreters Bible, p. 526)

Now don't be misled. When it comes to laying down our lives for others, we normally set it up on the top shelf there with Jesus who sacrificed his life for us, or with those who save a child by darting out into the path of a coming car, or the father who just last week perished on the lake trying to save his son. Those qualify, of course. But our lives are lived in hours and weeks and months and years, in days and decades. Every time you give up something of your life and invest it into the life of another, that portion of your life is gone forever. You will never get back the days or months that you care for a loved one, or the years you kept on forgiving, or when you reached out time and again with no response. You gave it up. That's what Jesus means too. Christ did not call us for privilege. We are called to be partners, not servants, but we still are called to serve, and to serve not ourselves and our kind alone, but to serve all of God's children.

We prefer to sort through the people around us and cull out the brightest and the best. Say there, "You're the right color, I'll take you." "You're pretty, we want you." "You can sing; you would make a good member of our choir. Come on in." "You're don't have a handicap, I'll take you." "You are not on drugs, even prescription ones to control the demons inside your psyche. We'd welcome you into our fellowship." Or, "Your name has a familiar ring to it, (I actually heard someone say it. Weren't your grandparents members of our church once?) Come on in." "You look like one who will cooperate with our way of doing things." Get rid of the complainers and the dullards and those who cause trouble! Got it? We want friends and fellow members who agree with us. We want nice, malleable folk in our church, too. We say

to newcomers: "And, since Jesus said that we are his friends in our little community of Christians, we will introduce you to the Savior and perhaps he will make you his friend too." I saw a little placard in the home of a church officer I used to visit which read:

Make new friends,
But keep the old.
One is silver,
The other is gold.

And all the while the Lord Jesus is standing there objecting: "That's not what I meant! I said, 'If you do what I command you, I will call you my friend.'" Then and then only. Friendship is costly: you have to spend something of yourself for your friends, the more the better. Friendship is sacramental. St. Paul nails it down a little tighter in Romans 5, where he writes, "While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for us, the ungodly. ... God shows his love for us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5: 6 and 8) The Bible never says that God so loved his Church, or those who say the right words about their commitment to the Lord, it says he died for all of them, of every station, place and clime: each of them, all of them, every one of them. It is not ours to determine who on earth belongs to Jesus Christ.

In the earliest church, they gathered as friends. They cared about each other. Acts 2 says they were all together and had all things in common; and they sold everything they had and distributed it, as anyone had need. Wouldn't it be wonderful if in the middle of our Christian fellowship we could find that kind of caring? I dream of a Community where people could walk in and find people who care. In the same Chapter, Our Lord told them that he came to earth so that His joy could be in them and that their joy might be full. (15:4)

Dr. Arthur Gossip, in his famous Commentary on John, goes on to ask, "But wait a minute. What happened to the Joy? Have we been misrepresenting ourselves and misrepresenting Jesus Christ? Just enter a Congregation as a stranger on any given Sunday, and one will normally find a kind of serious bunch of believers, grave and reverent and trying to figure out how they relate to each other. "Would anyone stumbling in to our Presbyterian Churches sense that the people in the pews were overwhelmed with joy or that they had made a wonderful discovery in Christ and were just dying to pass it along? Or, do the most of us who claim the name of Christ still sit quietly in our chosen pews and give the impression to the outsider that we are just fine the way we are thank you. If you come in with a need, you will

leave with it.

I frequently hear words in our churches that do not overflow with love. This group wants this thing, and that one wants this thing, and this one has this gripe, and that one has that preference. And most everybody wants things to remain the same. No changes, thank you. Why my goodness, you would think we were called to be enemies or to compete with each other. For what? We already have the victory in Christ.

Now I am aware that some within the sound of my voice have trouble finding friends. That is sad. Life can be painful. It can be a lonesome valley. Jesus walked it. Sometimes I walk that way myself. Partly, the problem is the world and "the busy hum of human affairs," as John Milton called it. Part of the problem is the other people out there, but part of the problem is you and me.

Friendship involves risks. Once you take it and it is not returned you will be reluctant to take it again. But, God also calls us to forgive. That takes courage and humility. It takes a determined effort to get outside yourself. We are so reluctant. But, you cannot spend your life condemning others, or sitting in your own wee world and expect to have friends come to you. No one wants to be around a grouch.

Friendship is like a bridge. Every one of us at some time or another in life, many, far too many times, has had to cross over a chasm. Over that chasm, like the bridge over troubled waters, a friend can help you across. But, when you become a bridge, people will walk on you? It hurts but that is the only way they can get across. My father, concerned for my welfare as young pastor, told as he grew older, "Don't ever let them walk on you, Rich." I said, "Dad, all your life you've let them walk on you, why should I change the family tradition now?" Life is meant to reach out and across. You never know what chasms you will have to cross before you are through, or what it will take to make it to the other side.

A friend is a person with whom you can dare to be yourself. You can say what you think and they will understand. They give you room to breathe. You can weep, laugh, pray or say nothing. A friend loves you and allows you to be what you have to be. Even when you make a fool of yourself, you are accepted. Love suffers long.

A friend is someone who shares your life and times. Someone who cares for you more than

anything or anyone else. Someone to whom your loneliness is a burden. Wordsworth wrote: "God grant that when I am old, there will be someone there who knew me when I was young."

Life is unkind and sometimes you grow old enough that your friends are gone. When you lose a friend it's painful . . . but if you never took the risk of opening up your heart, it wouldn't hurt at all. It is the price you pay for love. If you never had a friend, you would never have to say goodbye. I encourage you to be a friend and to take the risks of all that friendship means.

Take a little time this afternoon or through this week, to write or call or visit a friend. Thank them for being part of you." Maybe they live far away and you forgot to call. Maybe you had a difference of opinion and you have been too proud to step out to make amends. Maybe it is your wife or husband, child or parent, our neighbor. Just say "Thank you for being my friend." I have lived enough to know that for many, friends become your family - more precious than blood is the gift of friendship. The nicest words I ever hear is when someone says: "Thank you for being there. I needed you to make it. You didn't have to do anything; it is just that you were there.

Well, it is time to go - past time many of you are thinking. But there is one other friend you need to remember, too: the One who gave his life for you. The One who loves you totally. The One who said: "I will no longer call you servants; (You have been upgraded.) I now will call you friends; but only if you do what I command you." Go and be a friend to someone who needs what you have to give. It might not work; but it is worth the risk. That One I am speaking of is Jesus Christ our Lord. Go and serve him through serving his lonely people, for now and for evermore. Amen.

