

“Friends Are Good Medicine”
Passages from Proverbs and John 15:12-17
July 16 and 19, 2006

For over ten years while living here in Spokane, I was a part of a Pastor’s Support Group. Once a month I got together with this group of fellow Presbyterian ministers, five of whom were men and one woman. We met for two hours each month, eating lunch, talking about our lives and praying for each other. We walked with each other through every imaginable life situation: the ups and downs of ministry, the birth of children, the death of parents, spiritual struggles, illnesses and career changes.

I knew that I could count on each of these individuals to be a friend through thick and thin. We were committed to each other. I knew that all I would have to do is pick up the telephone, and one, if not all, of them would be there if I were in need.

Do you have one or two or more people in your life who, like the people that I just described, would be there for you no matter what time of the day or night you called? If your answer is yes, then you’ve got friends. True friends.

Recent studies suggest that not all of us could answer the question that I just posed in the affirmative. A few weeks ago a group of U.S. sociologists reported their findings in a paper entitled, “Social Isolation in America.” According to these experts Americans today have far fewer people with whom they can discuss important matters than any previous generation of Americans. People today, according to this study, are much more socially isolated than they were even twenty years ago.

Logically, we wonder why this dramatic increase in social isolation. The research points to many factors. Two-career families, the Internet, suburban sprawl, T.V., and the frenetic pace of life in the 21st century all seem to be contributors to social isolation. (1)

Believe me the Bible is not silent on this matter! God's Word makes it plain that we humans were created for relationships...relationship with God and with our neighbors. God's Word makes it clear that we are connected and that we need each other.

The Bible has quite a lot to say about friendship, especially in the book of Proverbs. For the next few moments I am going to take you on a brief tour of what the book of Proverbs has to say about friendship. Let's listen now for God's Word. (Read passages)

The focus of these passages in Proverbs and passages about friendship in other books of the Bible is how to be a friend. The underlying assumption of these passages is that if we learn to be a true friend, we will never lack for friends. Those who want to have friends must first be a friend to others.

So, according to Proverbs, how are we to be a friend? First and foremost, we are a friend by recognizing the importance of friendship and making room for friends in our lives.

Do you remember the words to the old Simon and Garfunkel song, "I am a Rock?" "I've built walls, a fortress deep and mighty, that none may penetrate. I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain. Its laughter and loving I disdain. I am a rock. I am an island."

In stark contrast to this ballad extolling the virtues of rugged individualism, in Genesis chapter 2, God says, "It is not good that the man should be alone..." (Genesis 2:18a). The Scriptures are clear, we were not made for social isolation; we were not made to go it alone; we need each other.

There is a story from Hasidic Judaism about a rabbi who talked to the Lord about the difference between heaven and hell. This story illustrates how much we need each other.

“I will show you Hell,” said the Lord, and led the rabbi into a room in the middle of which was a very big round table. The people sitting at it were famished and desperate. In the middle of the table there was an enormous pot of stew, more than enough for everyone. The smell of the stew was delicious and made the rabbi’s mouth water.

The people around the table were holding spoons with very long handles. Each person found that it was just possible to reach the pot to take a spoonful of the stew, but because the handle of the spoon was longer than anyone’s arm, no one could get the food into his mouth. The rabbi saw that their suffering was indeed terrible.

“Now I will show you Heaven,” said the Lord, and they went into another room, exactly the same as the first. There was the same enormous pot of stew. The people, as before, were equipped with the same long-handled spoons – but here they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. At first the rabbi could not understand. “It is simple, but it requires a certain skill,” said the Lord. “You see, they have learned to feed each other.” (2)

We are a friend by recognizing the importance and essential need for friends, and then making room for them in our busy, fast-paced lives.

The verse that truly captures the essence of being a friend in the book of Proverbs is Proverbs 18:24, “Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than

one's nearest kin." In the time that remains, I want to explore what this verse suggests about how we are to be friends to one another.

"Some friends play at friendship..." Another translation says, "Some friends come and go..." In our common vernacular we refer to "fair weather friends." We've all experienced "fair weather friendship." But, what our hearts really long for is a friend who sticks closer than our nearest kin.

I want to give you four examples of friends who stick closer than our nearest kin. This past Monday we held a memorial service in our church for Gladys Rivers' 29 year old son, Greg. Gladys has been in three different ChristCare small groups during her years here at HPPC. Members of all three of Gladys' ChristCare groups called or dropped by her house in the days before the service to pray with and encourage her, baked cookies for the reception after the service, served as ushers for the service, and coordinated food for a family gathering after the service. Sally Saad, who used to serve as Gladys' ChristCare leader and who now lives in Seattle, drove over for the day to attend the service and support Gladys. True friends are encouragers...even in our darkest times.

Here's another example. Some years ago, thirteen boys from Mr. Alter's 5th grade class at Lake Elementary School in Oceanside, California shaved their heads. They weren't protesting anything; they were just trying to show their support for their classmate, Ian O'Gorman. You see, Ian was undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma and faced the prospect of having his hair fall out in clumps. So Ian shaved his head. Then thirteen of the boys in his class did the same. Ian's classmate, Kyle Hanslik described why they shaved their heads. "The last thing he would want is to not fit in.

We just wanted to make him feel better.” (3) True friends bear our burdens so that we are not crushed by them.

Another example. In a sermon entitled, “The Gift of Mercy,” pastor and author Jim Dethmer tells the story of a hundred meter race held in the context of a Special Olympics competition.

All of the competitors, of course, were developmentally or physically challenged. After the gun fired, all the contestants moved down the track shoulder-to-shoulder, as fast as they could. Suddenly, one of the young women in the race tripped and sprawled headlong on the track and turned over in some amount of pain and embarrassment.

The rest of the competitors continued to race on for ten or fifteen meters. Without communicating among themselves, they all stopped, turned around, and jogged back to their fallen friend. They picked her up off the track, comforted her, and then, arm in arm, they ran together to the finish line. (4) True friends lift us up and walk with us when we fall.

A final example. Kim Engelmann, a minister at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, tells the story of a person she knows who was recently diagnosed with diabetes. It was a hard blow and this individual was very upset. She was overwhelmed by the prospect of a rigid diet and the host of other complexities posed by the disease. When she arrived home the night she received the diagnosis, she was alone and discouraged. As she walked into her apartment she found to her surprise that her entire apartment was covered with Post It notes written by a friend. They said things like, “You can do this!” “Keep fighting.” “Don’t give up!” Not only were these notes plastered all over her walls, they were also hidden in all kinds of unexpected places around her apartment. Months

later, she is still finding them! (5) True friends stick close...and keep sticking close when times are tough.

True friends are encouragers. True friends bear our burdens. True friends lift us up and walk with us when we fall. True friends stick close, and keep on sticking close when times are tough. This is what Proverbs 18:24 means when it states that “a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin.”

Do you have one or two or more true friends like this in your life? If so, thank God, and pick up the telephone or write a note today and tell them how much you appreciate their friendship. And while you’re thanking God for those true friends, why not ask God for the grace to be a true friend like that to the people that God brings into your life?

As we close, let me remind you that you do indeed have a true friend who is unlike any friend you’ll ever have. In our first Scripture lesson for this morning from John 15, Jesus reminds us of the special relationship that he shares with each of his followers. “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant doesn’t know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends...” (John 15:15).

Jesus is your ultimate encourager. He bears all your burdens. He lifts you up and walks with you when you fall. He sticks close and continues to stick close in every time of trouble. But, there’s more. Jesus, in an act of complete devotion, laid down his life for you. But, better yet, Jesus rose for you that you might have life everlasting.

Friends, open your heart today to Jesus, the truest friend you’ll ever have, and leave today with the chorus of the great hymn we sang earlier on your lips. “Hallelujah!

What a Savior! Hallelujah! What a friend! Saving, helping, keeping, loving, He is with me to the end.”

May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

Notes:

- (1) Time Magazine, July 3, 2006, “You Gotta Have Friends,” p. 36.
- (2) Yalom, Irvin D. The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy, 3rd Edition, New York: Basic Books, 1985, 13.
- (3) Illustration entitled, “Bearing Each Other’s Burdens,” www.preaching.com.
- (4) From a sermon entitled, “The Gift of Mercy,” preached by Rev. Jim Dethmer.
- (5) From a sermon entitled, “Friends,” preached by Kim Engelmann, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, July 7, 2005.