

Sermon for Sunday, July 4, 2010

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BLESSING OF RELATIONSHIPS

1 Samuel 18:1-5

On this 4th of July, there are many things we could discuss from God's word. We could talk about a godly citizen; we could discuss the blessing of a free land to worship the Lord as he has commanded. There are many things we could discuss. But this morning, I would like for us to think carefully about what God is doing among us to shape the world around us. That's part of our vision statement at Central: we seek to transform societies, including our own.

A primary way God brings transformation into society is through us as the body of Christ. I'm not talking about any sort of trust in legislative agendas or lobbying skills. I mean, using us as a body in the way we relate to one another and to the world, God brings change into this world. God brings transformation through relationships, both personally and societally.

This morning in considering what God does in us and through us in relationships, we will look at one of the famous friendships in the Bible: the one of Jonathan and David. Jonathan was the son of King Saul, the first king of Israel. Jonathan was heir; David, however, was God's choice to be king. David was a shepherd, an unassuming boy, yet God slew Goliath the giant through David's puny little slingshot. In his life it became clear that God was with David and part of God's manifest blessing in David's life came through his friend Jonathan. A question for you today is what is God doing in your life through your relationships/friendships?

1 Samuel 18:1 After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. ² From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. ³ And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. ⁴ Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt. ⁵ Whatever Saul sent him to do, David did it so successfully that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the people, and Saul's officers as well.

There has been a debate over the past years over succession to the British throne. Will Prince Charles assume the throne and rule for a while? William is to be the king one day. The debate has been whether Charles will abdicate in favor of putting his son on the throne instead and just let the line skip him in favor of his son who certainly will be able to rule longer.

What would it take for Charles to set that ambition aside? What do you think would have to stir in his soul to set aside something he's been working and planning for, waiting for his whole life? Would the situation change if it weren't his son he was sacrificing for, but a friend?

What have you worked for in your life? What would it take to lay it aside - your life goal - that thing you've given your life to in favor of a friend taking that opportunity?

God calls us to service and sacrifice for our relationships. Sometimes, we must lay aside our own pursuits for the sake of relationships. That love is sometimes very costly. Relationships demand sacrifice; blessing

someone else demands sacrifice. Why do we do it? Is it just out of the goodness of our heart, or is there something deeper going on? Certainly there is more.

We love and serve and sacrifice for one another in relationship because God loves us through our relationships. We have been made for relationships, made for friendships. Souls need connection! Who at the end of life if they've been lonely, think it's been a great life? Relationships give such meaning to life.

Part of the way God deals with this in life is through relationships; He shapes us through relationships. How?

1. He shows His faithfulness to us through our relationships.

You may know the story of King David well. Everybody loved him. The whole country was enthralled with him after his victory over Goliath. Don't underestimate what was done there; the country was saved. To save from wholesale slaughter, armies would at times have the strong men fight, and the outcome of that one fight indicated who won the whole battle. No one wanted to fight Goliath, the giant. Out came David, a shepherd boy. He wouldn't take the King's armor, just his slingshot.

Even the king's son Jonathan came to him in verse 3 and made an amazing gesture. He made a covenant in 18:3. Cut, pledge life bond. To cut a covenant involved slaughter of animals, saying may what happened to the animal happen to us if we are unfaithful. Talk about faithfulness of a friend. This was a pledge unto death. That covenant as the foundation of their friendship shows up several times again.

King Saul, Jonathan's father, as you can imagine began to be jealous and threatened by David. Not only was he losing the heart of his son, he was losing the heart of his nation.

1 Samuel 18:6 When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes.⁷ As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."⁸ Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?"⁹ And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David.

From that moment on Saul began a plan of removing the threat from the kingdom. He tried to kill him with his javelin... nail him to the wall, so to speak. Jonathan intervened. He then sent soldiers out to find and kill David, Jonathan again intervened. Saul was running David down in the court, and Jonathan intervened. Saul put together a trap to lure David back to the court so he could kill him, Jonathan intervened. This time, Saul threw that same javelin at his own son.

Again and again, Jonathan was faithful to David at a great cost to himself. He put his own life on the line more than once. Why? The covenant. He pledged faithfulness to him. In one particularly tense moment, Jonathan reminded David,

1 Samuel 20:42 Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'"

Their friendship was founded on the Lord, birthed out of their allegiance to their Father in heaven...not allegiance to a throne! Not to self-interest as a power friendship. It was not used to further a selfish agenda. Their allegiance to one another grew out of their union with their Father in heaven.

Do you have faithful friends? When you see them serve and love and stick by you through thick and thin, where does that lead you? Faithful friends point us to a faithful God, revealing in snapshots, in pictures, what God is like in reality!

We have a friend who sticks closer than a brother. The Lord Jesus is faithful to us because of a covenant, securing the favor of God through his life and death. He is the definition of faithfulness, loving us when we are unlovely, chasing us down when we run away, forgiving us and changing us when we are content to wallow in our sin!

When your friends are faithful to you, does it demonstrate for you and remind you of Jesus' faithfulness to you? I'm not going to embarrass anyone, so I won't use names. But not too long ago someone in our congregation was sick and went to the hospital. It was serious and scary. And when this family emerged from the ER after who knows how long, they walked out and found another of our congregation sitting in the waiting room. How long had that person been there? Who knows. Probably hours, quietly sitting, waiting, praying...being faithful. There to love at all moments, the expected and the unexpected moments. Just like God. God is faithful to you and to me, and sometimes He uses our friends as His hands and feet of faithfulness.

When a Christian brother or sister keeps his or her word, and you are thankful, remember that they are faithful to you because God is faithful to you. Give thanks to God. When a friend does something unexpectedly kind for you, they simply are a stand-in for God in that moment.

Friends, when you serve another in faithfulness, you have the privilege of being the hands and feet of Jesus to that person in that moment of need. Is that not amazing? You can serve as a living picture of the loving kindness of Christ to someone in need. As he's shown it to you, show it to one another. When you take a meal to a person, Jesus is shining his faithfulness through you. When you take someone into your home in a moment of respite for a weary soul... Jesus is working through you.

Those of you who have been at Central for a long time may have forgotten, but the new folks are keenly aware that sometimes Central can be a challenging place to find relationships that are meaningful. It can be a place intimidating to admit you have needs or are lonely in this huge body. Some here may even feel completely isolated and alone, and you want to retreat, erecting a wall around your heart where it is safe from anyone knowing or seeing your needs and burdens.

But friends, when you feel like you want to retreat that is exactly the time to open up and let this body of people demonstrate God's faithfulness to you. They/we won't do it perfectly because we are sinners. However, if you chance opening your life to others in the body just a bit, they can love and serve you as the hands and feet of Jesus. Through the members of this body, the Lord can show you just how faithful he is, how loving he is and how present he is with you.

Sometimes it will be costly in time, in effort, in money. But as a follower of Jesus, when you serve a friend in need, you are doing it not in your name alone. You are ultimately not your own strength to serve. You do it in the name of Jesus, who has loved and been faithful to you, and also who is working through you. Let's strive to have relationships of faithfulness, caring for one another when in need. When we do, we show Jesus' faithfulness.

2. He makes us who He wants us to be through our friends.

Sometimes doing what we know is right can be a difficult choice. Sometimes we need friends and others around us to press us toward becoming who God wants us to be.

Before David had defeated Goliath, and he had already secretly been anointed as King, God used Jonathan as a friend to strengthen David's hand toward what was an intimidating enterprise, becoming king. We need one another to be pressed on to be the people God calls us to be.

Note how Jonathan responded to David's anointing and victory over Goliath. In 1 Samuel 18:4, Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

How do you think Jonathan could have responded? He had been trained and raised to be king. Imagine the lessons the king's son gets. David, a shepherd boy, coming on the scene unable/unknowing how even to use armor!

Yet, Jonathan surrendered position to David, God's rightful king. He gave up his robe and the symbols of royalty as well as his instruments of command in the king's army in order to serve and bless the man God had called into HIS position. Jonathan laid down his life to serve and encourage his friend to be the person God designed and called him to be. How different this is from the expected enmity and ruthless self-protection we often find in ourselves. The truth here is that deep relationships catalyze a longing to be who God calls us to be. They prick us and push us toward God's desires for us.

The Lord of the Rings trilogy is one of my favorite sets of literature, and the movies aren't half bad. From them, perhaps you remember Sam and Frodo traveling up the mountain toward Mordor where Frodo had a calling to destroy the ring. This was an intense burden he had to do himself, yet couldn't really bear alone. He needed a company, a Fellowship, to destroy the ring. He especially needed Sam, the faithful and ever present friend to encourage him to do what he was called to do, be who he was called to be.

In the moment of truth at the end of the books and the movie, Frodo is climbing up Mordor, the mountain of evil. Hot lava surrounded them, exhausted after such a long arduous journey, weary from the weight of evil on him from the ring. Frodo couldn't keep going. In that moment, looking like all was lost, his friend Sam came to help him be who he was designed to be. Sam picked Frodo up, heaved him onto his shoulders and kept going up the mountain, to the mouth of death and evil. His friend carried him when he couldn't keep going himself. His friend walked with him to be who he was designed to be, to fulfill his calling, when the weight seemed like too much.

Where do you need friends to help you in becoming who you should be? Parents certainly need the family of God to nurture our kids, and to bear our burdens when we as parents just can't handle the challenge anymore. We become one another's family.

Maybe there is some sin in your life that you can't face alone, some addiction that you need brothers and sisters to come alongside you, even carry you when you can't keep walking toward what is right. Reach out for help. That's what relationships are for. Growth in holiness, toward becoming the person on the inside that God desires and has called us to become, is not an individual thing.

Some sports are individual ones; some are team sports. Growth in Christ's likeness is a team sport! We need one another! The proof is in the truth that the closer you become with another person, the more your own sin is revealed. Take marriage, or having a roommate or dealing with your children. When you grow closer with another person, where YOU need to change is revealed. And God provides not only the view toward change, but also the encouragement toward change through relationships.

Sometimes, like David, the task before us just seems too big to pull off, and God sends friends to help us when our knees might buckle. Perhaps you have a circumstance at work, a difficult call on something you feel is right before God but you are having a hard time making that call. Are there friends in your life that God has sent along to give you courage or protection to make the right call? Will you lean on them?

For all of us, this truth calls us to, in the words of Oswald Chambers, take advantage of "sacred opportunities." You may not know how God will use you, but seek to bless those around you with your words and presence. He just might be working through you to show a person in a fit of desperation exactly how present He is. As one of God's people, seek to be relationally aware of what is going on in the lives of those around you. Develop some relational antennae so to be in tune with what God is doing. And encourage. Your voice just may speak the very words of Jesus to another person to strengthen them in their hour of need.

That calls on us to be a certain type of church filled with certain types of people. We must pursue one another in relationship for this kind of strengthening and development to happen. If no one knows you well enough to recognize your gifting that needs encouragement or to recognize your struggles that they can come alongside you to endure, then you are missing out on experiencing the tangible love of God through others. Join a small group, a C-group, some other community group through a Sunday school class. It doesn't just happen all on its own. We must pursue one another with God's grace!

Or join a team to serve together! I just returned from two weeks serving in Kenya with members of our church, and I'll tell you I needed my sisters and brothers there to do what God had called us to do. We served as God's instruments in stretching one another beyond how we were comfortable to do something magnificent for the Lord. Go serve on a mission; serve in the kitchen on Wednesday nights; volunteer to teach a Sunday school class for kids; serve in the tutoring ministries; work with the refuge ministry. Many, many opportunities are in front of you to get to know and serve alongside your sisters and brothers here, for the glory of our Lord Jesus both in you and through you into the lives of those around you.

David kept going because God was with him; he was there tangibly through Jonathan. Jonathan simply was a Christ-alike friend in the flesh. Are you that kind of friend to others in this body?

3. He leads us to Himself through our friends.

Where do we go when life looks painful? We go to the one we are in covenant with: GOD, and friends who take us to God. David was running from Saul who was trying to kill him. He was hiding in caves, in dangerous towns and in the desert. At times he felt for his safety, wondered who would betray him, and just needed to be strengthened. He needed to come to God for help. And Jonathan helped him get there.

1 Samuel 23:15 While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. ¹⁶ And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.

Do you have friends who help you find strength in God; friends who point you to the grace and love of the Lord in your hour of need and weariness? Maybe a better question would be are you that kind of friend to anyone else?

We receive life from the true King, the Lord Jesus. We will not find strength in the approval of others, from piles of money, from good health or sufficient comfort. It all is fading. But real strength and courage comes from the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel of grace in our lives. He lived for us; he died for us; he was raised for us. And it is from him we find strength. As his children, we offer strength to others in proportion to the degree we experience him in our lives. We must pursue Christ personally, find strength from him personally so that we may point others toward that grace we have tasted from Jesus. Otherwise, we only have advice to offer rather than the strength and grace of God.

When your friend is in aguish, the most powerful thing you can do is to point them to the true King, Jesus, who can bring life. Sometimes we think that we need to do something and consider praying such a weak thing. But do you realize that when we pray for one another, we are putting our friends in the hands of the One who can love them best? He can love them far better than we ever could love them. When you pray with, plead for the life and health of your friends God can hear and longs to bless.

Sometimes a kind word can strengthen our hands in the Lord. Simply pointing out what you see God doing in another person's life can be the word that keeps them going. Do you look for opportunities to be an encourager?

Other times, just sitting with a friend so that they don't feel alone can strengthen their hands in the Lord. There is a genuine ministry of simply being present with one another. Will you do that? Why? Because God loves us through one another. He stirs in my heart through you, and in your heart through me.

Sometimes we feel unworthy to be Jesus' agents of touch in another person's life. We too keenly feel the sin and unworthiness of our own souls. Last week I was in Kenya teaching in a Bible college for Kenyan pastors. We were discussing how to point people to the grace of Christ from any part of the Bible. One example we ran across was from the Old Testament book of Joshua, where Rahab "saved" God's people by protecting Joshua and Caleb, the spies. She protected God's people, and as such points us to a fuller protection and salvation in the Lord Jesus who gave himself for us.

As we talked about how Rahab points us to Jesus, one of the students raised his hand and asked, "Are you talking about Rahab...the prostitute?" I replied that I was, She pointed Israel and us to the Jesus who saves. She also is one of the three women listed in the genealogy of Jesus. He again said..."The prostitute? I am very uncomfortable." Again and again he said it, shaking his head.

He, too, felt that a sinner was unworthy to point anyone to Christ. You must be holy to do that. Understanding his meaning, I asked him a question. “Are you uncomfortable with me pointing you to Jesus? I haven’t ever served as a prostitute [they all laughed] but I have done things equally bad and sinful in the eyes of God. My heart has the same roots as Rahab’s heart. I’m just as much a sinner [they weren’t laughing anymore]. In fact, I said, I can only think of one character in the Bible who has a significant role in God’s story of redemption in which we don’t also see the dirt and sin of their life. That’s the point. God ONLY uses sinners to point other sinners to Himself.” He caught what I meant.

Do you catch it? You, sinful though you may be, are a signpost, pointing others to the grace of God. This is not just a story of the conversion thing. It’s an everyday thing. How is the grace of God confronting your own sin and how will you tell that story to strengthen fellow strugglers? That’s how we lead, friends, by tasting of the richness of the grace and forgiveness of God and pointing others toward the same! Will you be honest about your struggles so that you too can strengthen other’s hand in the Lord?

We must be honest about the truth that our God brings healing into our lives; we must stop pretending to be perfect in ourselves. This is what our nation needs to see in and through us: the grace of God demonstrated and celebrated in this place. Our hope for change in this nation does not rest on a legislative action plan. Rather, we bring change as we, the City of God, celebrate and demonstrate the grace of God so that the City of Man is changed. That is what we celebrate on the 4th of July. We have freedom to tell the story of that grace anywhere at any time. It is God’s grace at work in and through us that will transform our society!

Do you have any friends here? If not, get to know some. You will be blessed of the Lord by giving of yourself in this community, letting us walk with you, pray with and for you. If you are here and know Jesus, love your friends by loving them toward Jesus this week. Point them to him, be with them and encourage them toward his work because you will be his hands.