



Duets: The Bane and Blessing of Biblical Relationships
“David and Jonathan”

A Dialogue Sermon by
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First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: 1 Samuel 17:57-18:9

On David’s return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. Saul said to him, “Whose son are you, young man?” And David answered, “I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.”

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.

As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they made merry, “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands.”

Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?” So Saul eyed David from that day on.

Gary: Many of you have read the book *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Many more of you have read newspaper articles by Mitch Albom, who is a very well-known writer in our Detroit community. Mitch went to Brandeis University, got to know Dr. Morrie Schwartz, and came to love him as only students can love a professor who is passionate about his work. On the day that he graduated from Brandeis University, Mitch gave his beloved professor a beautiful new leather briefcase. The professor hugged him and said, “You will come and see me, won’t you?” “Oh, of course.” “You will call me, you will write.” “Yes!”

Sixteen years later, not a word, of course. Mitch had gone on to become a very successful writer when one night he was watching television. Ted Koppel was on, hosting Nightline, interviewing Dr. Morrie Schwartz of Brandeis University, recently diagnosed and now dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. Mitch finally got up the courage to call him a few days later and flew over to Brandeis to visit his old professor in the Boston area. They decided, 'Well, maybe we should get together next Tuesday,' and the next Tuesday, and the next. Every Tuesday Mitch would fly in and visit with his old professor until he died.

One time, this old professor said to him, "Mitch, here's a lesson: Forgive everybody everything today. Making relationships right is too important not to forgive everybody everything today. Lesson one, Mitch: If you don't love, you die."

And one Tuesday afternoon Mitch got up the courage to say, "But you're a loving person and you're still dying." And Morrie said, "Oh, but relationships with those whom I love and who love me will never die. Never."

Friendships are strange and unpredictable things. As with Mitch and Morrie, they can cross the span of generations, and often they can endure the separation of years. We need other people. As Aristotle wrote thousands of years ago: "Without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods." Writer Len Wein says, "A friend is someone who is there for you when he'd rather be anywhere else." Or, as a nameless sage writes, "A real friend will tell you when you have spinach stuck in your teeth."

All of which is to say that friendships are vital to our health and happiness. In the account of David and Jonathan, we have an ancient story of friendship. It's clear from all of the biblical accounts that this was a powerful friendship. For David and Jonathan, it nurtured their souls. Their friendship provided strength and comfort for them during days of stress and crisis. It kept them spiritually alive when the world around them seemed to be falling apart.

Laurie: Gary! I wonder if I might interrupt?

Gary: Well, that's unusual during a sermon. But I couldn't stop you if I wanted to – and I *don't* want to. So go ahead. You have something to say and I'm sure I'm eager to hear it.

Laurie: I just want to say that I'm a little uneasy about romanticizing the friendship between David and Jonathan. There are some parts of their relationship that have been overlooked. A lot is going on under the surface of this friendship, if you ask me.

Gary: Well, I wouldn't disagree. Many friendships are complex. Friendships develop within the framework of other relationships, driven by our personal needs. In David and Jonathan, we have two very different personalities and needs. King Saul, Jonathan's father, is always in the background, at times loving David and at other times trying to kill him. Saul seems jealous of David's friendship with Jonathan, and Jonathan is caught between these two powerful men. Is that what you see?

Laurie: Well, I wrestle with how Jonathan seems to love David from the very start. As soon as David defeats Goliath and tells Saul who he is, *before* he'd ever spoken to Jonathan, we're told that Jonathan "loved him as his own soul." As far as we can tell, they hadn't even spoken. How could he say he 'loved' David?

Perhaps in watching David slay Goliath, there is a bit of hero worship. Here is the strange, powerful youth who saves his father's kingdom. Maybe Jonathan sees in David something he wishes he could be.

Then Jonathan makes a unilateral covenant. David doesn't say or do anything. Jonathan removes his robe and gives it to David – the robe which indicates that he is the crown prince, the next in line for the royal succession. He gives David his armor, his sword, his bow and his belt, strips himself of his weapons and places himself at David's mercy. Jonathan does this on his own. David doesn't do anything but take the stuff and go off to fight. It's a strange beginning to a 'friendship.'

Gary: True. Still, many people see the friendship between David and Jonathan as the most beautiful one in the entire Bible. They stick with each other through thick and thin. Jonathan is completely devoted to David.

Laurie: We're told that Jonathan loves David as himself. But David never says that about Jonathan. It seems that David continually asks Jonathan to do things for him, and the weight is always on Jonathan to come through for David, even when David asks him to lie and puts him in danger with his father.

Gary: That may be so, but remember that when David and Jonathan finally part, and Jonathan chooses to go with his father, Saul, we're told "David cried the more." And when Saul and Jonathan are slain by the Philistines, David laments Jonathan's death, declaring, "Your love for me was wonderful, passing the love of women." Doesn't that say anything about how David felt?

Laurie: It does. I don't doubt that David loved Jonathan. But it seems to me that David's expectations of this friendship were different from Jonathan's. The relationship doesn't seem on equal footing, and probably no relationship ever is. I'm not sure that David knew the depth of friendship for Jonathan that Jonathan felt for David. They love each other, but I think perhaps Jonathan loves David even more.

Gary: I will say this: there's something peculiar about David's relationships. David is a star. People gravitate to him all the time and he expects their allegiance. He comes between Jonathan and his father, Saul. He marries Michal, Saul's daughter, and then has her deceive Saul. He comes between irritable old Nabal and his wife Abigail, and when Abigail sends offerings to David, Nabal withdraws and soon dies. And what does David do then? He goes after and marries Abigail.

Laurie: Are you saying that David doesn't think twice about the allegiance others give him; that David isn't aware of how he relates to others?

Gary: It just seems that he is always at the center, and everyone has to adjust to him. Look at what happens later on when he sees Bathsheba, desires her, and simply moves her into the palace despite her being married. He tries to avoid his guilt and responsibility by manipulating her husband, Uriah. David actually acts as if Uriah is to blame, so he has Uriah killed. Yet David is shocked and amazed when the prophet Nathan confronts him with his behavior. There's a huge blind spot in David when it comes to his behavior and how he relates to others.

Laurie: *Okay.* But let's not be too cynical. David and Jonathan have personalities that ensnare them and make them vulnerable to their frailties. There's nothing unusual about that. The nitty-gritty of relationships is always far more complex than we think. Let's also affirm the integrity of the friendship these two shared. We find praise-worthy qualities here, as well as aspects that wave red flags. I'm not against friendships. I know I need friends. Is there anything positive we can learn about friendship from these two?

Gary: There certainly is. Every relationship is a mixture of healthy and unhealthy attributes. The relationship between David and Jonathan, while unduly romanticized, has many good qualities. The first is that Jonathan doesn't try to compete with David. For many of us, friendships can be veiled competitions. We feel like we've got to compare well in order to be accepted. Jonathan loves David as himself and says, in effect, "I'm going to be your friend and I'm going to throw away the scorecard. I'm fully committed to seeing God's best in your life even if it means I take the second spot."

Laurie: That brings up the role of *God*. All through the stories of David and Jonathan, I've been waiting to see where God is in their relationship. They invoke God in their oaths, but I'm not sure how much they seek God's direction for their friendship.

I know that I can only be a true friend to another person if God is first in my life. Otherwise, there's a real danger that I'll try to make my friend into a god and expect his or her total devotion. I can't expect another person to meet all of my needs. I must be clear that God alone is my refuge and my strength. I believe that God intends our friends to be agents of God's love, guidance and support, but they can never be the answer to our deepest spiritual longing.

Gary: I think it's important to affirm that God intends David and Jonathan to have a friendship that is mutually enriching and beneficial. We need to recognize this. God knows they both need support and encouragement in the violent world in which they live. Such relationships are God-given gifts – not only for David and Jonathan, but for you and me. We all need friends.

Laurie: Think about Jesus. One would think that the "Son of God" would be pretty self-sufficient, and indeed he was. But he also had friends and needed friends. He weeps over the death of his friend, Lazarus. John tells us of the "disciple whom Jesus loved." And near the end of his life, Jesus tells the disciples that he considers them to be friends.

Gary: And women were counted among his friends, at a time when no self-respecting rabbi would ever travel with or be seen with an unescorted woman. Still, Jesus never puts another person in the place of God. Remember how he describes himself as the vine and that we are the

branches. That's a healthy model for us. Jesus is at the heart of our lives, but we are connected with one another in his love.

Laurie: Jesus had the wonderful ability both to support other people who were friends, but also to call out the very best in them. He holds them accountable to their highest selves. He isn't content when someone wants validation for their accomplishments, like the rich young ruler who boasts of keeping all the commandments. Jesus sees that his riches ensnare him and tells him to give them away and follow where he leads.

Gary: Nor does he allow James and John to escape his disappointment when they argue over which of them would be first in God's Kingdom. And he can't be manipulated. He won't accept the guilt trip that Martha tried to put on him when he didn't get to Bethany before Lazarus died.

Laurie: He won't even allow his disciples to grieve his impending death when he is with them for the last time. He tells them it is necessary for them to let him go, that it is good for him to go away, for only so can they receive the Holy Spirit. So he does not encourage unhealthy dependency.

Gary: If there's one place where I see great maturity in David and Jonathan's friendship, it's at the very end when they are saying farewell. They know they won't see one another again. They weep and embrace. Jonathan says, "Go in peace. For we've both sworn in the name of the Lord that the Lord shall always be between us, and between our descendants." Then they let one another go: Jonathan to fight with his father and brothers, David to the future God is opening for him.

Laurie: So how are you set for friends? Do you have a group of friends who are a support-group for you and help you in your spiritual growth?

Gary: For over fifteen years, one of my spiritual lifelines was being in a weekly Covenant Discipleship group. Every week for one hour exactly. We set goals for our spiritual life and held each other accountable for them. We received support for our trials but we were also set straight when we wandered. Those spiritual friends kept me alive and on the right path.

Laurie: Life is not meant to be lived alone. Is that not why God created Eve? God said, "It is not good for 'human' to live alone." We are created for healthy relationships that support us and hold us accountable as we move forward in our journey toward God.

Gary: In the beginning, I told you about Mitch Albom and his professor, Morrie. One Tuesday Mitch said, "If you could be well, one day, one whole day, what would you do?" And Morrie said, "Mitch, I'm losing all of my muscular ability. It started with my legs. It got to the point that I couldn't drive, and I couldn't even walk. It's moved up to my arms and eventually it will move up to my lungs and I will not be able to breathe." He said, "It's humiliating. It will get to the point that I will have to depend on somebody else to take care of even simple bodily functions for me."

Laurie: And then he said, “Mitch, when you’re a small baby you have to count on somebody to do that for you. And for many of us, when we’re old or very sick, we have to have people do that for us. But the truth is, we need them every day of our lives. Life is about interdependence. *Interdependence.*” We need one another. That’s what friendship is about. Without the love of others, we die.

Gary: And as Morrie said: “Forgive everybody everything today. Making relationships right is too important not to forgive everybody everything today.” We wish for you friends who will give you the support, the discipline, the forgiveness and love that will shape you into a new creation in Jesus Christ.

May we pray? Lord, may we find in you our greatest friend. And in finding friendship with you, may we be set free to be true friends to others. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Through Christ’s strong name we pray. Amen.