

First Presbyterian Church
1 Sam 20:24-42, “Friendship in the Lord”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/14/2024

Today we celebrate 173 years of unbroken friendship in Christ within this community of First Presbyterian Church, McMinnville.

That’s incredible isn’t it?

It’s a tremendous legacy that can be viewed in many ways,
but today I want to describe it as a legacy of friendship.

People have been making friendships in this particular community for longer than the State of Oregon has existed.

(Oregon was ratified as a state in 1854.)

W.T. Newby, the founder of McMinnville, offered land to the first congregation who was ready to build a structure.

The Presbyterians were prepared to build first.

But, in the early years while other congregations were preparing to build, up to four different denominations shared the sanctuary.

Collaboration and friendship with our brothers and sisters in Christ has been part of our DNA from the very beginning.

Ordinary people just like you and me have worshipped, celebrated, served together, argued about things in committee meetings, played games together, shared countless meals together, worked on projects, shared their fears and overcome tremendous obstacles over this huge expanse of time.

To be friends in Christ across generations, across threats from wars, across polarizing political upheaval, across shifts in our expectations of family and work and technology requires love.

A deep and abiding kind of love that is bigger than any one person who shares in it.

I think we see some of those characteristics on display in the story of David and Jonathon from 1 Samuel 20.

There’s a lot that can be done with this passage. For instance, I can pick out principles behind the various vignettes within this chapter that show how friendship that overcomes adversity requires trust, honest communication, commitment, and taking risks.

But instead of walking through the text and describing each of those principles,
I think we can go deeper through focusing on two simple questions:
What do you love? What do you fear?

If we love God and love one another, then what we fear
will not overwhelm our friendship.

If our love is rightly framed, we will not be controlled by fear
but by the Spirit of God.

Our text takes place in a dangerous time for David.

David's great success in battle caused him to develop a reputation
that greatly outstripped King Saul's.

He knows that King Saul wants to kill him because he's dodged multiple spears
from Saul's own hand, plus soldiers came to kill him in his home at night.

David fears Saul. But he loves God, and he loves Jonathan – Saul's son.

The two friends meet secretly at the beginning of chapter 20
and arrange for way to determine if its safe for David to return
to the palace.

Jonathan will go shoot arrows into a field,
and if he tells his errand boy the arrows are near, then it's safe.
But if he tells him that they are out beyond him,
then David must run for his life.

Then in the passage we read, when David missed two dinners
at the palace in a row, King Saul rightly smelled a conspiracy.

Saul feared David, and he may have loved God,
but he loved being king even more.

He tries to poison his son's thinking
with his own misplaced loves and fears in v. 31:

In a fit of rage Saul cries out, "**As long as the son of Jesse
lives on this earth** (notice that he could not even say his name)
neither you nor your kingdom will be established!"

The fear of a rival and the love of power drive Saul to a murderous rage.

When our fears and loves are misplaced our sense of right and wrong,
our sense of justice, our purpose in life and presence in the world
are thrown out of alignment as well.

This can be true in a dramatic and obvious way, as with King Saul,
but it is still harmful when it occurs at a more typical level.
It's harmful to our friendships.

Now, it's easy for me to say, "love God and don't be afraid of other things,"
but I'm not out of touch with reality.

Our fears in the world are many and they are justified.

What do you fear?

I have fears. I deal with anxiety. Some are personal others more general.

One of my recent fears has been that Donald Trump would be assassinated.

I feared it because it would plunge us into a time when violence
determines our political leadership.

Using violence to silence someone you disagree with—someone you fear—
is abhorrent, foolish, and wildly counterproductive.

The only possible outcomes from this attempt on Trump's life
were terrible.

Our nation is facing what I firmly believe is the less terrible option.

But I am still afraid.

The only antidote for my fear ... is love.

The question I must ask is this:

"Is my love for God, my love for the body of Christ assembled here today,
and my love for our neighbor deep enough
to help me hear the Spirit of Love
calling me forward through my fear?"

At the end of our passage, David and Jonathan meet face to face for the last time.

David bows to his friend who has so honored him and stood by him
in the face of tremendous pressure.

They display nothing of our modern macho culture.

They kiss and they weep – but David wept the most.

Why? Because it was the end of a beautiful friendship.

My life has had uneven experiences when it comes to friendship.

Childhood friends were not easy to come by,
but the ones I developed have stayed really close to me
through much of my life.

I had several seasons of life where I fell into a tight group of deep friendships
who would go everywhere together, do everything together.

I was then introduced to my greatest friend, my wife Sonja,
who has impacted my life more than anyone outside my parents.

Loving God and loving Sonja has steered me
past many dangers and fears.

But finding friends who are men has been a lot more challenging for me
as I enter midlife.

It's hard for men to find time to be with each other,
to find an activity that can anchor their connection,
and to be vulnerable and open enough to develop
love for each other.

Daniel Ellenberg, who works cultivating men's groups, says,
"Men put too many of their (shall we say) 'emotional eggs'
in a woman's basket."

I've also seen fear drive a wedge between myself and two of my closest friends.

It's not a unique story, but it's one that I hoped I could avoid:
Differing views on Covid vaccines, different sets of information consumed,
different fears about the world
and different behaviors that accompany those fears.

Now it's hard to get together and go for a walk.

I weep over that and I'm worried that those friendships will wither,
and I don't know if I'll ever have friendships like those again.
I'm confused about those friendships. There's no clear resolution.
There's much I cannot control or change.

What I can do is check to see that my love for God
and my love for my friends is properly framed,
and that my fears are not guiding my response.

What do you love? If we love power and influence,
love accumulating resources and possessions,
love control in our relationships, love comfort and ease,
then our fears of dangers in the world will not be tamed,
and our friendship will be threatened.

There's a closing remark in 1 Sam 20 that I find deceptively profound.

As they depart, Jonathan says 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.’”**

Oh, how God smiled upon the friendship of David and Jonathan.
What a powerful friendship!

Jonathan does not merely call the Lord as a witness ‘between you and me’
but “between your descendants and mine.”

Do I have a personal friendship about which I could say,
“God is witness that my kids and their kids will do right
by the kids and grandkids of my friend?”
Who can say such a thing? But David and Jonathan do.
And you know what? There’s very good news for us:
that’s the kind of friendship we have in the church.

It is a *different* kind of friendship that we have.
We don’t choose all the people who show up here each week.
We have natural affinity with some more than others.
Yes, there are people we just love laughing with and working with
and serving with. But there’s more than that.
What we have in the church is a connection
that can span 173 years and more.
It’s here in this context of the body of Christ that we can
look each other in the eye and say,
“The Lord is witness between you and me,
between you descendants and mine.”

Because this is a place where love wins more often than fear intimidates
This is a place where everyone is accepted.

Exactly 10 years ago I was invited to share in the friendship that we have here
as your pastor. And I'm so glad to have served here for a decade –
longer than any other place I have lived or worked as an adult.
Now some people will say pastors shouldn't be friends with
the congregation they serve.

I understand the need for boundaries, and I know that pastoral relationships
are unique, but I never understood not being friends.
This statement from Jonathan to David offers a new framework

This is a place where we attend to our Friend and our Savior Jesus Christ,
who is the one in whom all things cohere.

The cosmic Christ knows our hearts, resides among us,
and empowers us to share in the mission of God
no matter what dangers we face,
no matter how afraid we may be.

And this love we encounter in the body of Christ draws us into a
unique kind of friendship that is witnessed to
by God from generation to generation to generation.

Today as we celebrate, we ground ourselves in that love.
We draw near to God's heart and to one another,
and I promise you: God smiles on our friendship today.