
Friendships are funny—I mean “strange” funny, not “ha-ha” funny. Sometimes friendships emerge from common interests. Sometimes friendships come out of mutual relationships. Sometimes friendships occur by coincidental geographic proximity. Sometimes friendships form across cultural divides. Sometimes friendships just happen.

The biblical language struggles to find the right word to describe the relationship between Jonathan and David. Their friendship was more than just convenience; Jonathan’s passion (his love) for David is called "i‘ahan, (1 Samuel 18:1) the same word sometimes used for the power of romantic affection.

Jonathan and David enter into a covenant (1 Samuel 18:3) with one another. The word for “covenant” comes from a root meaning “cutting.” Do you remember how good friends used to show their friendship by each making a small cut on the hand and then mixing their blood? That is the kind of symbolism captured in this word “covenant.” Each is now part of the other: a covenant of friendship.

Their friendship is put to the test when Jonathan’s father, Saul, gets so jealous of David’s military successes that he wants to have David killed (1 Samuel 18:7-9, 19:1). Jonathan goes to bat for David and, in effect, saves David’s life (1 Samuel 19:6). David is now Jonathan’s brother-in-law—1 Samuel 18:27—as this wild story unfolds. They are tied together in so many ways!

As I ponder how Jonathan saved David’s life, I wonder “How have I saved the life of a friend?” It would be rare to save a friend from death, but we can certainly save friends from making wrong turns in life. We can encourage our friends to maintain the values of Christ when the world tempts otherwise. We can show interest in a friend when most of the world ignores her or him. We can offer a word of hope when every signal seems to say “no.” We can help a friend be realistic, when false dreams seem more like fun. We can be silent when a friend needs to talk. We can talk when a friend needs to listen. There are a lot of ways to save a friend’s life.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Charles Marsh (Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Knopf) writes: "...the true fellowship of souls such as he and his friend enjoyed at a state of ‘unimaginable freedom and power,’ an ineffable lightness..."

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Gracious God, Friend of the friendless, move in me so I too can be a friend...”

August 11, 2019 Text: Ruth 1:6-11, 14-18 “A Mother-Daughter Covenant”

Whatever happened to Orpah? We more or less remember the story of Ruth and Naomi and how Ruth decided to go back with Naomi to Naomi’s home country, Judah (Ruth 1:6). Their covenant is a story often sung even today at weddings: “Whither thou goest, I will go. Wherever thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people will be my people my love, Whither thou goest, I will go!”

That’s Ruth’s song, but what happened to Orpah? She is Naomi’s daughter-in-law who finally decided to stay in Moab, rather than go with her mother-in-law to Judah (Ruth 1:14). She falls out of the biblical picture, but one non-biblical tradition says she became an ancestor of Goliath, the giant with whom David fought (1 Samuel 17:4, 23).

Naomi and Orpah parted on good terms (Ruth 1:14). At first, she even thought she would go with Naomi to “the old country” (Ruth 1:10). We are not left with a negative impression of Orpah. She simply disappears. (Ruth 1:15)

Have you ever lost track of a friend? I once re-connected with a college roommate simply by running his name on Google, but that doesn’t always work. What about David Merritt? Corin Mitchell? Vorawee Wong Lee? Bill Morris? How might my life have been enriched had I been able to stay in touch with these folks?

What would life have been like for Orpah if she had gone with Ruth and Naomi? Life is full of these “what if’s” and we can only conjecture. Wondering about it might be entertaining, but the heart of the Old Testament story is about something else: the bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

At the heart of the covenant between Ruth and Naomi is the uncertainty of what the future would hold. You and I know “the rest of the story,” but Ruth and Naomi were walking toward a mystery. Naomi had heard that things were going well in Judah (Ruth 1:6), but there was no assurance that she would be welcomed back, there was no certainty that the Moab daughter-in-law would be accepted; there was no guarantee that the good news about Judah’s prosperity was even true. Even so, Ruth and Naomi head to Judah. Friendship walks on even in the dark.

What Someone Else Has Said:
John Tyson (Assist Me to Proclaim, Eerdmans) writes: “Friends were supposed to ‘ provoke one another to good works’ and ‘draw each other out’ in love.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “What a friend I have in Jesus...”
August 18, 2019 Text: Ruth 3:1-6, 8-12, 16-18 “A Covenant to Marry”

Some students of the Bible get really excited about the figures of speech and idioms used in this week’s study text. “Feet” (Ruth 3:4, 6, 8) was sometimes used as a euphemism for what we call “private parts.” “To lie with someone” (Ruth 3:7) meant to have sexual relations with them. It almost reads like the script for a Hollywood feature film!

Rather than get sidetracked by these lascivious possibilities, let’s zero in on the spiritual quality in these relationships. Naomi is eager to do what is best for her daughter-in-law Ruth and arranged what a good next step is for Ruth (Ruth 3:1-4). Boaz is ready to be as helpful as possible to Ruth and acknowledges that she, a poor, immigrant widow, is a person of high worth (Ruth 3:10-11). Ruth wants to be supportive of her mother-in-law Naomi and shares her good food fortune with her (Ruth 3:17).

Do you see how loyalty, kindness, sharing, generosity, and support begin to define how these key characters relate to one another? Naomi could have dumped Ruth as an immigrant outsider, but she does not. Ruth could have abandoned Naomi, an old woman in a culture that did not respect the aged women, but she does not. Boaz could have ignored with impunity this stranger who ends up in his bed, but he does not. You and I know that the story has a happy ending [Ruth and Boaz get married (Ruth 4:13) and Naomi gains from the sale of family property (Ruth 4:9)] but it did not automatically come to that conclusion. It happened because these central figures showed, as we note above, loyalty, kindness, sharing, generosity, and support. Put those tools into the hands of God and great things will happen!

Last winter, I was in Michigan. I saw a sign in front of a store parking lot: “Clearing the snow to make room for more snow.” That is what is happening in this week’s study text. Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz use the gifts that God has given them and God adds even more to those gifts.

These three weeks in the Book of Ruth have been explorations into covenants, agreements that put all parties on the same pursuit by the same standards and for the same goals. That is like a biblical definition of family, of friendship, and of marriage. I am left to ask: “Am I a friend with God?”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good (Putnam), Jan Karan quotes Dinah Craik: “Oh, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts or measure words, but to pour them out. Just as they are—chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them…”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Teach me to be loyal and kind…”


In a society in which men were fully in charge and women were only useful tools for men’s advancement and children were pretty much ignored, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians would have been revolutionary. Remember the context in which Paul was writing and even today these verses seem shocking. Husbands are not supposed simply to use their wives; instead they are to love them (Ephesians 5:33). Wives are not supposed to resent their husbands; instead they are to work beside them and to trust them (Ephesians 5:22, 33). Children are to be raised in relationship with the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). That’s strong talk.

When Paul writes about slaves, we get to the bottom line about all human relationships. Look at Ephesians 6:9: “(God) doesn’t distinguish between people on the basis of status” (Common English Bible). “...with (God) there is no partiality” (New Revised Standard Version). “God makes no distinction between you and them” (The Message). “And (God) has no favorites” (New English Bible). “...and God doesn’t prefer one to another” (New Testament in Language of Today).

The title of this week’s lesson sums it up. The covenant in family relationships is to be of mutual love. In fact, Paul extends that to the very weakest ones in the culture of his day, slaves. As Timothy G. Gombis has noted, “Although Paul’s words used to be used to support the practice of slavery, they are, in fact, instruction that lays the groundwork for the eventual elimination of slavery.”

Paul’s insights are in no way intended to insist that persons remain in abusive relationships. To stay in such an uneven interaction is to deny the very core of the biblical injunction to be in mutually loving circumstances.

This week’s study text offers some of the most challenging injunctions of the New Testament. Trying to “translate” what Paul wrote in the first century to our life circumstances in the twenty-first century is not easy. How would the apostle have worded his instructions to our contemporary scene? Maybe the best we can do would be in the penultimate words of Ephesians: “May there be peace with the brothers and sisters as well as love with the faith that comes from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!” (Ephesians 6:23, CEB).

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Care of Creation (Wesleyan Publishing), Joseph Coleson says: “Family life is designed to teach that love does not hoard power, nor use power abusively; love empowers.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Help me love better, O God…”

Turning the Page

The first commentary in this series was for December 2, 2001. All of the lessons since then have been based on the International Lesson Plan, following the Adult Bible Studies of the United Methodist Publishing House (Cokesbury). Beginning with the September 2019 studies, Cokesbury will not be following the International Lesson Plan. Instead, they have developed their own scope (topics) and sequence (Scripture chosen). The material will still be called Adult Bible Studies and will have the same purpose as the previous plan.

The good folks at Cokesbury have provided me with a list of the texts to be used in this new approach. Rather than continuing with the International Lesson Plan, I shall be working with Cokesbury’s new model. My guess is that most of the readers of these commentaries are making the same switch.

I hope we can continue this journey together. I’m always glad to know when you have (or have not) found it helpful.

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