

“Soul Friends”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

7-19-20

Based upon 1 Sam. 18:1-5; Mark 2:1-5

In his book Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World,¹ Vivek Murthy, who was the 19th Surgeon General of the United States, writes about how human connection is essential for good mental and physical health. Human beings are social creatures who do not do well in isolation. But just being able to see others or even talk to them isn't really sufficient either. Ideally, human beings need three kinds of connection in their lives—intimate relationships associated with family and marriage, communal relationships which generate feelings of belonging, and close friendships.² In the past couple of weeks, we have considered the love associated with physical intimacy, *eros*, and the love associated with feeling you belong with a larger group, *storge*. The love we are going to consider today, *philia* in the Greek, falls between those two on the intimacy spectrum. It is the love we associate with friendship. C.S. Lewis famously said that *philia* is the most “unnatural” of all the loves because we don't need it to survive. He argued that we need *eros* in order to exist and *storge* in order to be reared and protected, but *philia* is unnecessary in biological terms.³ He was wrong. It turns out that friendship is critical to our mental health, which in turn has a profound effect on our physical well-being as well.

Seeking to explore this idea, a couple of psychologists out of the UK did an experiment, which sounds a bit harsh, but was illuminating nevertheless.⁴ They had college and graduate students take personality tests, which were both fake and skewed to put the test subjects into three categories. Group one was told that their test results predicted that based upon their personalities, they would likely have a future filled with belonging—a stable support network of spouse, family, and friends. Group two was told that their results indicated that their future would be filled with misfortune caused by their being accident-prone. They were highly likely to break bones, require many hospitalizations, and experience physical pain. Group three was told that based upon their personalities, they would most likely end up alone in life. After the subjects were given this news, they were then asked to take IQ tests and various reading and memory tests. The first group anticipating a happy future, sailed through the tests, and interestingly, so did the second, even though they thought their future would be filled with physical pain and misery. But the third group performed badly on all of the tests. Just thinking that they would be alone without any friends in their future affected their memory, their IQ scores, their ability to do logical reasoning, and more. Humans need at least the promise of a few close friends, if not marriage or community, or both our minds and our hearts suffer.

Philia, therefore, is a very sustaining and critical kind of love. Like *storge*, *philia* usually takes time to develop because it is typically grounded in finding some kind of commonality between you and another. But once you find that thing, whether it is the fact that you both grew

¹ Murthy, Vivek H., Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World (New York: HarperCollins Pub., 2020).

² *Ibid*, 211-284.

³ The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy- Reflections on the Psalms- The Four Loves- The Business of Heaven (New York: Inspirational Press, 1994), 244.

⁴ The study was done in 2002 by psychologists Drs. Roy Baumeister and Jean Twenge. See Murthy, Together at 251-2.

up in the same city, or love shellfish, or hate the Dallas Cowboys, or whatever, *philia*, as Lewis described it, usually comes with a conscious or unconscious moment of recognition: “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.” After that initial connection has been made, then the relationship can grow to varying degrees of intimacy depending on the circumstances and the number of things held in common between you.

Aristotle, who wrote extensively about friendship, said that there are three kinds of friendships, those of utility, born out of a common need, those of pleasure, born out of a common kind of enjoyment, and those of “the good,” born out of mutual respect and admiration. This last kind, which Aristotle considered to be “perfect” friendships, are much rarer.⁵ Murthy labeled the types slightly differently, saying there are inner circle, intermediate, and outer circle friendships.⁶ But both men would agree that the friendships that arise because of circumstances— you live in the same dorm, you need to car pool with another parent to get your kids to sports, you work in a cubicle across the aisle from someone— those kinds of friendships come and go over the course of our lifetimes. They are valuable— valuable enough that now during the pandemic, people are missing them to a degree they didn’t expect. But these circumstantial friendships aren’t lasting like the friendships that Aristotle called “perfect.” Those relationships can weather time and geographic separation because the connection is at the level of the soul.

This is the kind of friendship that David and Jonathan had with each other. *First Samuel* says that when Jonathan met David after he had triumphantly killed Goliath, Jonathan loved him “as his own soul.” Almost immediately he made a covenant with David, giving him his robe and armor and weapons. If we had continued to read the story, we would have seen that Jonathan also gave him shelter, protection, military intelligence, and everything else David would need to become king instead of Saul, Jonathan’s father. Now because we are not used to hearing same-gender relationships in the Bible described with such strong words of devotion, many modern readers have wondered if this was a homosexual relationship. In our denomination, we believe that all people are made in the image of God, straight, gay, and everything in between, so we wouldn’t have a problem with the relationship if that were the case. But context is everything when interpreting the Bible, and such an interpretation is inconsistent with both the historical and literary context. Historically, at the time the text was written the Jewish people did not accept homosexuality, so it is unlikely that they would have celebrated David and Jonathan’s relationship if they had been lovers. Linguistically, the love that is used here is not *eros*, or its Hebrew equivalent, and is combined with a term for binding which has political, and even conspiratorial implications as well as emotional ones. This suggests that Jonathan loved David not just as a best friend, but also as his choice for king.

Although I think our misunderstanding of the text is understandable given the difference between our times and theirs, C.S. Lewis said our modern inclination to look for *eros* where there is deep, abiding *philia* reflects a different cultural bias, one against appreciating how substantive and life-changing true friendships can be. “Those who cannot conceive Friendship as

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ch. 8-9; see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII Summary, Sparknotes.com, available at <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/ethics/section8/>; and Kubwayo, Wilson, “3 Kinds of Friendship” at <https://www.wilsonkubwayo.com/3-kinds-of-friendships/#:~:text=There%20are%20three%20kinds%20of,%3A%20usefulness%2C%20pleasure%20and%20goodness.>

⁶ Murthy, *Together*, at 218-42.

a substantive love but only as a disguise or elaboration of Eros,” Lewis wrote, “betray the fact that they have never had a Friend.”⁷ I don’t know about that, but I do know that our culture focuses far more on *eros* and *storge* than on *philia*. Yet *philia* is just as powerful and life changing. A perfect friend can see you as you are and love you anyway. A perfect friend, like Jonathan, can be as loyal or even more loyal than a spouse. A perfect friend can listen and affirm, challenge and support with so much love, that just hearing his or her voice from hundreds of miles away can make you feel better. Perfect friendship is based on the joy of having a kindred spirit, or alter ego in your life, someone whose soul loves your soul and vice versa.

I feel blessed that in all the stages of my life I’ve had at least one best friend like this. When I was in high school, I spent so much time with my best friend that our teachers called us Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. We could complete each other’s sentences. Have you ever had, or do you have now a friend like this? Maybe your best friend is someone who you grew up with, so he or she has more history with you than anyone else. Maybe your best friend served in the military with you or raised a child at the same time. If you’re blessed, you will have at least one such relationship in each of the different chapters of your life, and a few that continue through them all. As today’s texts demonstrate, these kinds of soulmate-friends shape who we are and who we become.

David would have had a much more difficult time becoming king if it hadn’t been for Jonathan, not just because Jonathan helped him avoid Saul’s wrath, but also because Jonathan was supposed to be heir to the throne himself. Similarly, it seems likely that the unnamed man in the gospel lesson today would not have received the healing he needed from Jesus if it weren’t for the determination of his friends. They wanted their friend to be well so badly they were willing to risk the consequences of destroying someone’s property to do it. This is one of the few stories in Scripture where Jesus performs a healing not because of the person’s own faith but because of the faith of his friends. They brought him to God because they knew that he needed God to be made whole.

To me, these stories illustrate not just the critical and wonderful role that *philia* can play in our lives, but also that there is fourth kind of friendship neither Aristotle nor Murthy addressed. Celtic Christians called this kind “soul friendship.” Soul friendships can begin as friendships of utility or pleasure, and have many of the qualities of perfect friendships. They are affectionate and respectful, share common values, and a kind of loyalty that can survive distance and the passage of time. They include mutual respect and admiration. But the real binding glue of these friendships is faith. Soul friends are the people in your life that you feel comfortable talking to about God and spiritual concerns.

When I was in seminary, the president preached on these kinds of friends, calling them “theological friends” rather than “soul friends.” He defined a theological friend as someone “who perceives my destiny in relation to the God we both serve and encourages me to become the person in Christ that God has made possible for me by Creation and Redemption.”⁸ In other words, our theological friends, because they themselves are connected to God through love, can

⁷ *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis* at 246.

⁸ Gillespie, Thomas, “*Theological Friendships*,” Opening Convocation Address on John 15:1-17, Princeton Theological Seminary, Sept. 16, 1997.

see God's involvement in our lives through love and help us see it too. Their faith and their love enable them to see our God-given potential, affirm our gifts, and challenge our perceptions when needed, helping us to become the people God made us to be.

Jonathan saw instantly that David had all the qualities of a good king, qualities his own father lacked. He could see this even when David was just a boy. So, he did what he could to help David become the king God anointed him to be. Similarly, the friends in the New Testament story saw their paralyzed friend as more than a victim. We don't know their back story, whether they grew up together or worked together or what. But it is clear from their actions that they weren't content to write their friend off as demon-possessed, or a sinner doomed to die or become a beggar, as probably many other people in the village were. They believed in him, and in God's power in the world and their lives. That belief enabled him to become the whole person they saw in him.

Think for a minute about whether you have a friend that you can talk to about your faith and/or God. Not everyone does, unfortunately. Presbyterians tend to be funny about talking about our faith. Few of us are naturally drawn to evangelism and many of us are repulsed by it. So even bringing up the subject of God or faith with someone can feel sort of taboo, like talking to someone about how much money they make or what their private dreams and fears might be. We don't want to make people uncomfortable. But the beauty of theological friendship is that it doesn't have a particular spiritual agenda. It isn't about proselytizing or correcting another person's theology. It's about giving people the support they need to enable them to find out who God intends them to be. Theological friends pray for each other, and listen carefully to both what their friends are and are not saying. They remind them that God loves them very much when they can't feel that, and that has God gifted them so much, when they are behaving as if they have forgotten that too. You may not spend a lot of time hanging out with your theological friends. You may not share the same taste in music or food. But the *philia* and spiritual wisdom they provide can draw you closer to God, and into a better understanding of God's love, *agape*, that I'll talk about next week.

In Matthew's gospel, the parable of the ten bridesmaids, in which five so-called "foolish" bridesmaids miss the wedding party because their lamps run out of oil and the other five won't share theirs, implies that you cannot give faith to someone else. It is like a fuel that they have to find for themselves. (Matt. 25:1-13). That may be true. But you can give someone the love of friendship, and whether you intend it to or not, that love can make all the difference in the world in the strength of that person's faith and relationship to God. *Philia* provides help and hope, affirmation, direction, and joy. It is a gift from God which God values so highly that Jesus himself called his disciples friends. So, I encourage you during this pandemic and beyond, to stay in touch with your friends in whatever way you can, and to seek out and cherish the soul friends you find in or outside of the Church. In the love you share, you will help give their lives meaning, and will move step by step closer yourself to becoming the person God made you to be. Amen.