

Soul Mates: David and Jonathan

Fourth Sunday of Easter – May 2, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

1 Samuel 18:1-5; 19:1-7

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. ² Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. ³ Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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.

[Later, King Saul, Jonathan's father, jealous of David's victory over Goliath and all the popularity it brings him, decides to have David killed.]

Saul spoke with his son Jonathan and with all his servants about killing David. But Saul's son Jonathan took great delight in David. ² Jonathan told David, "My father Saul is trying to kill you; therefore be on guard tomorrow morning; stay in a secret place and hide yourself. ³ I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you; if I learn anything I will tell you." ⁴ Jonathan spoke well of David to his father Saul, saying to him, "The king should not sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have been of good service to you; ⁵ for he took his life in his hand when he attacked the Philistine, and the LORD brought about a great victory for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced; why then will you sin against an innocent person by killing David without cause?" ⁶ Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan; Saul swore, "As the LORD lives, he shall not be put to death." ⁷ So Jonathan called David and related all these things to him. Jonathan then brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before.

Today, in the third sermon of our Friendship and Faithfulness series, we look at the close friendship of David and Jonathan. Their story is the longest and most complex story about friendship in the Bible.

Centuries ago, La Rochefoucauld wrote, "However rare true love may be, it is less so than true friendship. . . A true friend is the greatest of all blessings . . ." Young David and Jonathan were true friends, their souls bound together in covenant relationship. Their bonds of friendship would transcend family, tragedy, and even death.

Like father, like son?

During the time that the Israelites settled in Canaan, they had no earthly king. The LORD God was their king. But as time wore on, the people, wanting to be like their neighbors, pushed harder and harder for a human king. In the end, God gave them what they wanted. God's prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of the united tribes of Israel. Saul quickly proved to be a

Reading Bible Stories

It can be pretty hard to know what to make of some Old Testament stories. Here are a few tips:

1. The stories tell us what happened, not what ought to have happened. There is not a clear moral to every story.
2. What people do in these narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Sometimes it is just the opposite!
3. All the stories are selectively told. Every writer has to pick and choose what details to include, even how the story will be told. This is true of the Bible too.
4. The stories are not written to answer all our theological questions. They may raise as many questions for you as they answer.
5. Do your best to close some of the historical and cultural distance between our world and ancient Israel. A few basic reference tools, like a Bible dictionary, will be helpful in this.

Here are two simple questions to keep in mind when you read Old Testament stories. First, what does the passage tell us about God's character, his activities, or his will? Second, what does the passage tell us about the story of Israel (the people of God)?

For more on this, see Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. It is written for laypeople and is excellent.

disappointment. He was disobedient to God and given to making rash decisions. Once, Saul was even ready to kill his own son, Jonathan, for breaking one of Saul's battle orders. Only the intervention of the people saved Jonathan's life. After Saul disobeyed God a second time, we are told that "The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35). God told his prophet Samuel to anoint a young shepherd named David as the next king of Israel. Not knowing that God had chosen David to be his successor, Saul welcomed David into the royal court as a musician. But after David defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, the mentally and spiritually deteriorating Saul began to suspect that David might be the one to whom God had given Saul's kingdom. And Saul's heart turned against David.

The grace of friendship

Jonathan, Saul's son, first met David soon after his victory over Goliath and the Philistines. Like so many others during David's long life, Jonathan must have been drawn to the charismatic young man. We are told that Jonathan's soul was bound to David's. Jonathan loved David as he loved himself. Jonathan made a covenant with David, even handing over his royal robe and sword. It is important for us to see that Jonathan offered all this to David without even a hint of reciprocity or reward. Jonathan's covenantal friendship was a gift freely given. Indeed, this pretty much characterized their relationship. Twice more, Jonathan would make a covenant with David and only on the third occasion are we explicitly told that the covenant was made mutually. In Jonathan's gift of friendship there is no *quid pro quo*; there is no transaction. *Such is grace.*

Reflecting a friendship based upon the bonding of souls, Jonathan must always walk a tightrope between his loyalty to his father Saul and his loyalty to David. In today's second passage from 1

1 and 2 Samuel

1 and 2 Samuel are actually one long literary work. Ancient Hebrew scrolls couldn't hold the entire book of Samuel, so the book was copied onto two scrolls. This is true of the Book of Kings and the book of Chronicles as well. However, it is not true of New Testament books such as 1 and 2 Corinthians, which are two different letters written by Paul.

The book of Samuel tells the story of Israel's transition from the rule of judges to a kingdom, roughly 1,000 years before Jesus. Not only do kings emerge (Saul the first, David the second, Solomon the third) but also prophets. Israel's kings would not have the absolute freedom typical of kings in the ancient near east. Instead, the kings of Israel were subject to God and to the covenant. Israel's prophets would hold the kings (and the people!) to account. The prophet Samuel brought God's word to King Saul. Nathan did the same for David.

Samuel, Jonathan persuades his father to spare David's life and restore him to the royal court. Later, Jonathan and David would conspire in an attempt to discern Saul's true intentions toward David (see chapter 20). Even then, all that Jonathan asks of David is that, no matter what happens, David would always be faithful to Jonathan's own family. At their last meeting (ch. 23), Jonathan eagerly abdicates to David his own right to be Saul's successor. Not long after, Jonathan is killed in battle. It would be many years before David would act upon his promise to be faithful to Jonathan's descendents.

Though soul mates, the relationship of Jonathan and David is pretty one-sided; Jonathan gives far more than he ever gets. Patricia Tull writes, "Friendship often begins with the unmotivated kindness of one person toward another, a generous, uncalculated action offered simply from the joy of companionship. Jonathan's spontaneous love initiated the friendship and over the course of several episodes he continues to nourish it. He asks nothing of David in the present; all he asks for the future is to be remembered for the sake of his descendents. . . Jonathan stands in good company with the God whose love for humankind precedes and exceeds all possible returns . . . [Jonathan] is the friend few of us deserve but most of us would dearly love to have."¹

Jonathan could have acted like his father, working always to protect his own interests. Instead, Jonathan chose the path of friendship, covenant, and trust. He pledged himself to work sacrificially for David's goodwill. *Such is love.*

¹from Patricia Tull's essay, "Jonathan's Gift of Friendship," in the April 2004 issue of *Interpretation*. She is professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Daily Bible Readings

(the stories of Jonathan and David)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Samuel 14:1-46 Jonathan leads the Israelites to victory but is condemned by his father.</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Samuel 16 David is anointed by Samuel and goes to the royal court.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Samuel 20 Jonathan and David hatch a plot</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Samuel 23:15-19 David and Jonathan make a covenant//1 Samuel 31 The deaths of Saul and Jonathan</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Samuel 9 Many years later, David shows kindness to Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

May Book Recommendation

Why I am a United Methodist, by William Willimon

Whenever someone asks me how they can learn something about John Wesley and United Methodism, I urge them to begin with this slender volume. In seven chapters, Professor Willimon introduces us to John Wesley, to the importance of the Bible in our denomination, to our practical theology, and more. As always, Willimon is thoughtful, heartfelt, and plain-spoken.

Available now at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Borrowing a vivid image from the story of Absalom's death (one of David's sons) in 2 Samuel, Professor Tull writes that friendships and marriages "hang between heaven and earth." They carry our loftiest ambitions in life, but also all our human limitations. Indeed, the phrase 'soul mates' is probably most often used in the context of marriage. How are marriages and deep friendships similar? How do they differ? Look back over your life and reflect on the truly deep, close soul-bonding friendships you've had . . . if you've had any. Do you feel like you chose that person or did it 'just happen'? Did you offer your friendship freely or in the hope of some immediate gain? How can we better recognize and reciprocate the gifts of friendship that are offered to us?
2. In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "For life to have personal meaning, there must be people who matter to us, and for whom we matter, unconditionally and nonsubstitutably. Ask someone what his or her greatest source of happiness is, and they are unlikely to mention their latest car, their last holiday, their new designer jeans. They are, or were, more likely to say: my marriage partner, my children, my reputation, my friends. Lose these and we lose the very concept of happiness, of a life well lived, of dedication to something larger than ourselves." Do you agree with the rabbi? How would you go about talking to one of our youth about the importance of true friends? How would you describe a true friend? What advice would you give regarding the nurturing of true friendship? What would you say if the youth asks you why so many people have so few really deep, true friends . . . soul mates?