

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • JANUARY 19, 2020 • EPIPHANY
GUIDING LIGHT SERIES

The Litany
Based on Psalm 15

O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart:
who do not slander with their tongue, do no evil to their friends,
but honor those who fear the Lord.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

The Scripture
1 Samuel 18:1-5

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.

The Message
Guiding Light: Friend
Mark Briley

Synopsis: An ancient philosopher said, "There are only two people who can tell you the truth about yourself -- an enemy who has lost his temper and a friend who loves you dearly." What does it mean to be a true friend? Not best, but true? A true friend is someone with whom you can strip your soul, and when the skeleton of the soul is stripped bare, your friend will not laugh or gasp at how ugly things may be. Jonathan was just such a friend to David. You need a Jonathan.

*"Then Jonathan made a covenant with David,
because he loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:3).*



Your friends determine the quality and direction of your life. Your friends determine the quality and direction of your life. Your friends determine the *quality* and *direction* of your life. This mantra is one leadership guru and father shared with his kids more times than they'd like to count. If even to the point of annoyance, this dad felt it was worth restating over and over again so that it was front of mind. *Your friends determine the quality and direction of your life.*

To whom, in this life, are you soul bound? We are naturally designed to be soul bound to others. If there is a part of God in each of us, if we are in fact made somehow in God's very image, it makes natural sense that there would be a magnetism of our souls that is constantly yearning to be connected. It is why feeling *disconnected* is very hard and why loneliness hurts as it does. It's why break ups and relationship fights and family drama have accompanying wounds... they can heal over, yes, they can scab and scar and, sometimes, become stronger in the broken places but what is undeniable is this deep longing we all have to be connected. Even more simply stated, this desired connection is why we do the wave at sporting events or have a moment of excited curiosity when we go to the curb to see what's in the mailbox, and why you check your phone every 90 seconds hoping to find more "*Likes*" on your latest social media post.

I had this connective desire in a strong way exactly one-year ago this weekend. It was so strong that I couldn't even explain it at the time but have processed it more thoroughly since. I got three text messages almost all at once from my brother, my sister, and my folks saying, "*The baby is coming!*" My brother and his wife, Ashley, were in route to the hospital to deliver their little girl. Everyone in the family was scrambling to play their pre-determined roles when the moment came except for me. I was just on the other end of three text messages coming from Kansas City. I could and did pray, of course. That was something I could do, but I had this family FOMO feeling that I was missing out on the big moment. I was disconnected. I immediately looked at our calendar – and that Friday evening into Saturday was the only free 20-hours we would have for months. That settled it. When the kids got out of school that Friday, we were going to head to Kansas City to meet that baby.

Yes, the weather forecast called for dump loads of snow, and the oft-feared wintry mix, and yes, the baby and her parents would just be getting home from the hospital that

day, and my parents' house, where we would be staying, was having some work done so it was "*in a state*" if you will. Regardless, my desire to be connected to the sacred moment prevailed. And well into the drive as darkness was winning, and snow was heavy, and multiple cars were ditched, I had my regrets. "*What are we doing? What peril have I put our family in?*" But we inched along and finally pulled into my parents' driveway later than anticipated, of course. I put the car in park and just sat there white knuckled for a bit.

When I stepped outside, I was stunned still. There was no wind. There was not a great chill. Just snow falling in silence, and among the most beautiful scenes I can recall in some time. My son, Dane, who had been begging for snow for several years running had already busted out the car door as fast as he could and made his way out into the middle of the silent cul-de-sac with his arms spread wide, his head tilted back, his smile wider than the boundaries his face naturally allows. And watching his joy allowed the tension to slowly evaporate from my body. My friend sent me this quote that says, "*If you choose not to find joy in the snow, you will have less joy in your life but still the same amount of snow.*" My soul felt bound to his joy.

Then, we made our way through the neighborhood to my brothers' home to hold baby Brookelynn for 45-minutes or so before returning to my parents to sleep. It snowed all night, and I tossed and turned wondering how we'd get back home. But we rose, packed up, and headed home to Tulsa. Our waking connection to my family was only a few minutes while the time in the car was painfully significant. Why do we do things like this? It is curious, isn't it? And we'll hold Brookelynn this afternoon at her first birthday party – conveniently held during halftime of the Chief's game.

This soul connection. Ask anyone, and you'll get stories about friends who drove through the night to be there in a time of need or the recognition of an important time when friends were needed to hold the space for them in a difficult moment. There'll be talk of different kinds of friends – the ones who've walked with you since childhood, "*who knew you when...*" There are friends who press the threshold of your nerves and friends who hold the line when you can't seem to hold it yourself. *Your friends determine the quality and direction of your life. To whom are you soul bound?*

We're three weeks into 2020 and three weeks into our Guiding Light series. Week one was our quest to find guiding light in a word. I hope your Star Words are working on you already. I heard one card went missing and was discovered at Hy-Vee. It was ultimately returned to its rightful owner. The word? *Humor*.

Last week, we considered how even death can be a guiding light... how something must die in order to be resurrected. We have to give up something, make some sacrifice, to grow spiritually. So, we've claimed a word, we've committed ourselves to

spiritual discipline, and today we're looking for a guiding light in a friend. This is the, "*who are you doing life with*" question. Who are you going to take with you? To whom are you soul bound?

An ancient philosopher said, "*There are only two people who can tell you the truth about yourself—an enemy who has lost his temper and a friend who loves you dearly.*" What does it mean to be a true friend? Not best, but true? A true friend is someone with whom you can strip your soul, and when the skeleton of the soul is stripped bare, your friend will not laugh or gasp at how ugly things may be.

When we scan the biblical account for such soul-bound friendship, Jonathan and David always rise to the top. If you're not familiar with this friendship, you're probably at least somewhat aware of David – who becomes King David of course. Even if you've never stepped foot in a church, you likely have some cultural awareness of David because of the famed David and Goliath story. Little guy overcomes the big guy (*or big obstacle*) and inspirationally triumphs. It was the story of Rudy Ruettiger before he ever made the Notre Dame football team. It's the story of Frodo in *Lord of the Rings*. We know that story. And of course, Rudy had his best friend, Pete, and Frodo had Samwise (*who was coincidentally Rudy if anyone's keeping track*) ... best friends who believed in them when no one else would. Jimmy Fallon has Justin Timberlake, Oprah has Gayle... and David had Jonathan.

David and Jonathan meet after David uses his Dollar General slingshot to slay the giant Philistine, Goliath. Jonathan was the son of King Saul, who had made a great GM move by drafting David from the farmland to take on the big Philistine. This could have totally backfired on Saul, but David was confident, and he got the job done after countless others, proven Titans even, failed. [*Let the record show – the Titans failed*]. Jonathan, a bit in awe of David's victory perhaps, is there for the big meeting between David and King Saul after Goliath goes down. What does Jonathan do? He starts gathering his stuff: his sword and armor; his bow and royal num-chuks and stretches them to David: "*Here.*" And we wonder initially, is Jonathan offering these in a resigned sort of way like, "*Dad will never be proud of me now... here... you might as well have this stuff, David.*" Was he relieved thinking, "*With a guy like David around, I'll never have to fight again!*" Or was he honoring David and saying, "*You are a great warrior and I share what is royally mine with you*" as a sign of solidarity. Whatever the case, the two find themselves "*soul-bound*" as the text says almost instantly.

David's victory over the giant made Saul look good at first, but of course David was soon the name on everyone's lips which would later become a threat to Saul's sense of authority. Jonathan would later find himself in a tough spot as his dad's loyalty to David and vice versa waned. How did their friendship prevail? When time permits, you should dig into the 1st Samuel account of their story as it weaves through the larger narrative. What I think is fair to say is this: everyone needs a Jonathan.

A Jonathan believes in you when no one else does. A Jonathan is loyal even when you make it hard to be loyal. A Jonathan has seen you at your worst and loves you anyway. A Jonathan gives and wants nothing in return. A Jonathan keeps you in check when you want what you can't have. A Jonathan defends your life's meaning, when your life seemingly has no meaning. A Jonathan lifts you even when you fail. And let us not forget... *Your friends determine the quality and direction of your life.*

Why then, with this deep desire to be connected and soul-bound and a chin-lifter for others, do we struggle so deeply with this? Columnist Laura Marcus claims the typical male idea of a best friend is "*someone they haven't seen for ten years.*" Interesting.

Why do more Americans claim loneliness than any time in our history? Just a year ago, the New York Times¹ declared loneliness an "*American Epidemic.*" They noted an article from 2009, ten years ago, called "*The Lonely American,*" where they shared the troubling news that American's had fewer confidants than in the past, and almost 25 percent reported that they had not talked about matters of importance with anyone in the last six months.

Go back another ten years... in the year 2000... when Robert Putnam's work, "*Bowling Alone*" was released. It was a groundbreaking book based on vast data showing how we had become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures. Putnam said this growing isolation was impoverishing our lives and communities. His evidence included nearly 500,000 interviews over the previous quarter century showing that we signed fewer petitions, belonged to fewer organizations that meet in person, knew our neighbors less, met with friends less frequently, and even socialized with our families less often. The symbol he noted to encapsulate it all was this: We were also bowling alone. More Americans were bowling than ever before, but they were not bowling in leagues. We were bowling alone. This was all prior to social media, of course, which many have said has cut into our face-to-face, deeper, stretching, authentic relationships with others. The reality seems to be that we're foregoing vulnerability and intimacy in exchange for surface relationships – and we might stretch that to include surface commitments.

Jonathan's may be rare – and we may struggle to be a Jonathan to someone else – but the longing is there and we know, when life comes to an end, it's not our money, or trophies, or cars that we want at our bedside. We want those who are soul-bound to us to see us through to the other side. One leader said one of his goals was to "*Know my eight.*" The number may be a bit arbitrary but for him, that number was to represent his pall bearers. He was in the second half of his life and could only name a few. He knew he needed to put himself out there and invest in more relationships.

¹ These two articles helped shape the sharing of the included research. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/23/opinion/loneliness-political-polarization.html?module=inline>. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/opinion/letters/loneliness-epidemic.html>

Author Leonard Sweet actually writes about our need of a Jonathan in our life.² He says the barriers to such a relationship are really tied up in three syndromes – ‘*sin’dromes*’ he even ventures to call them.

The first he calls the “*What’s in it for Me?*” syndrome. He describes it as our *egosystem* – the system in which we are built to survive and get ahead – making it natural to want to associate with those, who will help us get ahead. We tend to call it networking – a drive for power and prestige found through who we know. If these “*friends*” can’t make the net “*work*,” then we decide it’s time for a new set of friends. This is not to say we shouldn’t help one another, and certainly we often connect with circles of those who are often navigating similar challenges or dreams, but if this is as deep as we go, we’ll not find, or become, a Jonathan.

In part, this is what Sweet says leads to the second sin-drome which he calls, “*No Down Elevator*,” only looking to get ahead or go-up... no willingness to go deeper. Clinical psychologist Dan Montgomery uses the image of taking the elevator down to explore what it means to get to the deep soul-bound connections of relationships. Montgomery says the elevator starts at the *façade* level – a level of public appearances. This is where we relate through social custom: small talk, weather, “*whad-ja-do-for-the-holidays*” chatter. It’s a necessary stage of getting acquainted which happens to be the next floor down – *acquaintance* level. At this level, we reveal some of our opinions; maybe drop a line about the impeachment hearings and see how it is received; maybe you wait to order a drink until the other person does because you’re not sure what’s socially acceptable in the relationship just yet. There’s some risk at this level, but most don’t take exchanges at this level personally. To reach the third floor down, the *friendship* level, we have to willingly experience emotional vulnerability. We share a lot of feelings at this level but hold back on the deeper ones. We look for compatibility, empathy, and mutual trust. If there is solid, mutual response at this level, we may choose to take the elevator down another floor – the *intimacy* level. We come clean with the dark side – the memories, wounds, and reflections that make us who we are but often feel too shameful to disclose. We also share the heart’s desires. To get past the going up syndrome, we have to be willing to take the elevator down.

The final sin-drome Sweet calls “*What, Me Sacrifice?*” This often includes the highest cost of true friendship – sharing our most precious commodity: *time*. Sigmund Freud famously asked, “*What does a [partner] want?*” Emotional Intelligence guru, Daniel Goleman later answered, “*Simple. She wants a partner who cares what she wants.*”

What are you willing to give of yourself to become soul-bound to another? Jonathan and David had this connection. And as we imagine “*VISION*” as our congregational

² From Leonard Sweet’s book, “*11 indispensable relationships you can’t be without.*” David C. Cook publishing. Colorado Springs. 2008.

star word for the year – it seems that true friends may go a long way in making this quest fruitful. Why? Because... *your friends determine the quality and direction of your life.*

Nothing about this quest is easy. I don't pretend that to be true. People, even friends, let us down, and we can grow bitter. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, who's ongoing quest for racial justice we celebrate this weekend said, "*I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.*" To find our way to the deepest and greatest sense of spiritual depth and meaning, we must give up resentments and hatred and take on forgiveness and heal.

Jonathan and David find their snags along the way and their connection costs them in some critical ways at different points. But I can't shake this sense that at soul-level – we know this need is true, and God has created us with such design for the joy and enrichment, and perhaps even soul-survival, of our lives. Bottom line? Join a bowling league. Just kidding. Sort of. Putnam's research states that "*joining and participating in one group cuts in half your odds of dying next year.*" Make a commitment to take some engagement in your life to the next level. Check out a small group or Sunday school class. Get engaged with our youth or children's program or join an outreach effort.

While it's great that we gather here in rows on Sunday morning to praise God, it is the circles in your life that will take you down the elevator to deeper levels of intimacy. It is in those places that you'll find friends who will hold your chin up when you can't do it yourself. They'll be there for you when your health has you sidelined. They'll be a guiding light for you when you're blinded by the stars. Everyone needs a Jonathan. Sometimes, we can't find one until we become a Jonathan ourselves.

To share as parting benediction, passed down to me from a friend of a friend and now onto you...

May you be blessed with good friends.
May you learn to be a good friend to yourself.
May you be able to journey to that place in your soul where
There is great love, warmth, feeling, and forgiveness.
May this change you.
May it transfigure that which is negative, distant, or cold in you.
May you be brought in to the real passion, kinship, and affinity of belonging.
May you treasure your love
May you be good to one another and may you be there for each other.

May you experience all the blessings, challenges, truth, and light
that you need for your journey.

May you never be isolated.

May you always be in the gentle nest of belonging
with [those to whom your soul is bound]. Amen.

[your Anam Cara soul friend/love].

Adapted From Anam Cara
By John O'Donohue