

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
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The Scripture
1 Samuel 18:1-9

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.

As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they made merry, "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands." Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him. He said, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?" So Saul eyed David from that day on.

The Message
"11 Indispensable Relationships: You Need a True Friend"
John DeLaporte

What a privilege it is to be back before you today, Broadway, to proclaim our Scripture and share this message. As someone still so new to Disciples' liturgy and Broadway's experience of worship, I am grateful to share this sacred time with Saint Ed Varnum, who is right there to catch me should I stumble this day. Thank you, Ed! And we hold Pastors Mark and Terry in prayer as they take some much-needed time with family and friends.

This morning, we return to our second installment in our new Summer Sermon Series exploring these 11 Indispensable Relationships we need to live lives of meaning, purposes, and holiness. As Pastor Mark stated last week, we explore these relationships “because our relationships determine the quality and direction of our lives.” Using the relationships, we find in Scripture, we uncover the essential “*withnesses*” we need to navigate the journey God has laid out for each of us.

Now last week if you were with us, you know we dove into the deep end! We named our first essential relationship, our first “withness,” as your editor. Your editor is that person who breaks into your life when you are in need of compassionate correction. They know your heart. They know your voice. They encourage you to be your best self. And when we veer off track, when we are blinded by distraction, when our priorities are misplaced, it is the privilege of the editor to step into our mess with a proverbial red pen and offer correction and redirection when we need it most.

We saw this on display in one of the more Jerry Springer-worthy stories from our Hebrew Scriptures, David’s adulterous and murderous affair and Nathan’s bold and prophetic correction.

This week glean a story of a sweeter sort, from David’s earlier years, recognizing that in addition to an editor, we are also in need of a true friend!

Because for every Burt there is a _____

For every Harry (Potter) there is a _____

For every Michael (Jordan) there is a _____

For every Lavern (DeFazio) there is a _____

For every Oscar (Madison) there is a _____

And because of the big reunion that debuted not long ago, for every Monica, Rachel, and Phoebe there is a _____!

And for every David there is a Jonathan! The original *bromance*...true friendship of biblical proportion! Today we ask the question, *who is your Jonathan?* And why do we need a Jonathan in our lives if we are to live the journey God has prepared for us?

The Biblical Text

Jonathan, of course, is the eldest and beloved son to Israel’s first king, King Saul. We first meet Jonathan in the 14th chapter of 1 Samuel which recounts his military victory over a garrison of Philistines at the city of Geba. Our Scriptures portray Jonathan as a skilled military leader and a politically savvy counselor to his father. Jonathan is one who knows what it was like to put one’s life on the line for others. He is someone willing to fight for ideals greater than himself. Yet unlike his father, he knows in his

heart that Israel's royal kingship flows primarily from the Lord, and secondarily from the Lord's anointed. But it won't be his military might or political prowess that will endear him as one of the most beloved biblical figures in the Old Testament. Rather, it will be his fidelity and friendship with David that will earn him pride of place in Salvation History.

While no explicit text states exactly how Jonathan and David meet, we can deduce that they would have encountered each other when David joins Saul's household. David is first employed as a musician to play the lyre for Saul when the king would become aggrieved by evil spirits. David quickly becomes a rising military and political prodigy destined to succeed Saul and become Israel's second and greatest king.

As David's reputation and prominence rises, Saul descends deeper and deeper into jealousy, fear, and despair. With God's blessing rescinded because of his transgressions, Saul sets his sights on this rising star intent to snuff him out and retain his grip on power.

But it will be Jonathan who consistently intervenes to protect and save his friend. It will be Jonathan who will risk everything – even his own life and royal position – for a man he loves more deeply than himself.

We hear this echoed in our passage of focus today which employs the language of sacred covenant to describe the depth of their relationship – language only reserved when expressing our sacred capacity for human intimacy – soul touching soul, naked self-gift, a bond so deep and so bold it can only be described as covenant.

David and Jonathan go through a great deal together. Today it is not our task to recount all the twists and turns of their story – a Bing-worthy saga with all the drama and court intrigue that would rival Netflix's "The Queen," and one that ends with all the anguish of any Greek or Shakespearean tragedy.

For when word reaches David of Jonathan's eventual death at the hands of the Philistines, and Saul's at the hand of his own sword, David composes a song of lament enshrined in the opening chapter of 2 Samuel. It is an elegy that sings of the depth of his pain and loss and longing for his dearest of friends. David laments:

*Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.
How the mighty have fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!*

Do you have a Jonathan in your life? A soul-friend. Someone who the Greek philosopher Cicero named, “*a second-self*.” Do you have someone like this? If you do, or if you did, recall their name in your heart right now. Hold it with you as we take this next step....

A True Friend Defined

Leonard Sweet, whose book serves as the inspiration for this sermon series, states that your Jonathan is one who believes in you when no one else does:

- is loyal even when you make it hard to be loyal,
- Is the first to call in good times or bad,
- gives and gives and wants no payment,
- walks with you in all seasons of your life

Sweet says your Jonathan stanches the internal bleeding from your blanched body when depression drains the life from your soul. Your Jonathan sees you naked in all your treachery and lechery, at your most heinous and your most luminous, and loves you anyway. They keep you in check when you want what you can't have. They grant you grace when you take them for granted. They defend your life's meaning when your life has none. But most of all Sweet says, your Jonathan sacrifices himself for you, even knowing that the more your song rises, the more their own fades into the background. Or to echo John the Baptist, they allow themselves to decrease enabling you to increase.

This is quite the job description! If you were like me, you might have found yourself recalling a previous Jonathan that once fit the bill but may no longer be present in your life. Perhaps the name of your own spouse or significant other came to mind...but that is sort of cheating! Maybe your mind went to a simpler connection...your dog or cat or goldfish!

Oprah Winfrey confessed, "Over the years, I have felt the truest, purest love—the love of God, really, I imagine that's what God's love feels like—is the love that comes from your dog."

But I suspect if we are being truly honest many of us would probably answer *well..... gee.... I don't think I really have a Jonathan in my life...Or I did at one time, but not anymore....*

If you are struggling to name your Jonathan, you would not be alone!

Jonathan's are the rarest of breeds. They are the white whale of the relational world. Sweet calls them "an endangered species." We have acquaintances. We have friends. Thanks to Mark Zuckerberg and the folks at Google we can even amass friends and followers by the thousands! Many of today's top influencers on platforms like Instagram, Tiktok, and Twitch have digitalized and commodified the concept of "friendship" into a billion-dollar industry!

But a true Jonathan comes along once or twice in a lifetime. And when they do, they are to be cherished beyond all things.

Ecclesiastes 6 states, "Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure...faithful friends are a life-saving medicine."

Part of what makes a true friend so elusive, so rare, and thus so valued is due in part to the ingredients that go into the making! True friendship of this sort requires we lay aside our egos for the sake of another. It requires a humility and a grace that does not come naturally to most. Jonathan/David level friendship asks us to sacrifice things that are of immense value to us in order that a true friendship might flourish. We must give up our time, our obligations, our wants and needs, our personal priorities in order to make the relationship a priority.

How many of us have allowed a Jonathan to slip through our fingers because we stopped making phone calls, ceased sending birthday cards, overscheduled friendship from our calendars! I can name several Jonathan-level friendships from my past that have since devolved into mere acquaintances because we stopped making it a priority.

And some have greater hurdles to climb. Sweet says, "Men are notoriously culturally disadvantaged in the "friends" department." I know many a manly Christian man who squirm with discomfort at this biblical bromance - two men locked soul-to-soul whose love surpasses that of women.

Now I know I speak in generalities, and not all is true for all men. Indeed, much may be true for some women. But in our culture, intimacy, vulnerability, male affection, and deep self-sharing are not a regular part of the male ethos. In fact, boys and men inclined to such are often ridiculed, berated, or told in no uncertain terms to "knock-it-off" and "be a man!" We hold up the David who lops the head off Goliath as masculine hero to emulate but skip over the tenderness with which he cradles his lambs, the fidelity he shares with friend, or the poetic psalms composed at his hand.

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld jokes about this male reality when he talks about the "man hug" – Men know this embrace...it's the one your uncle or cousin gives you at the reunion where you embrace one another while smacking each other firmly on the back

in doing so! Seinfeld says men always have to add a little aggression when expressing affection so as to not appear soft..." I'm hugging you, but I'm hitting you!"

But it's not just in male-to-male relationships where men often struggle with intimacy. We can struggle even in relationships where intimacy is expected. Fr. Richard Rohr does a lot of work with what he calls "the masculine spirit." He has written books and leads men's retreats designed to break down this false masculinity and help men heal from it embracing the fullness of who God has created them to be. In a recent blog post exploring the flow of sacred love in our lives, Rohr states:

"To move beyond our small-minded uniformity, we must extend ourselves outward, which our egos always find to be a threat, because it means giving up our separation, superiority, and control... Men seem to have an especially difficult time at this. I have had the pleasure of presiding at many weddings over the years. Three different times, as I prepared the couple to exchange their vows, the groom actually fainted and fell to the ground. But I have never seen the bride faint. To the well-protected and boundaried male ego, there are few greater threats than the words "till death do us part." (I am sure women have their own blockages, but the commitment to love doesn't seem to be one of the major ones for the vast majority of women.)"

Now I did not faint on my wedding day, thank God! However, Cynthia often tells me...*you need to get more friends!* Her social calendar puts mine to shame! She can chat for hours on any manner of subjects with an array of girlfriends from all areas of her life. I struggle to call my best friend from college once every six months, and when I do, we mostly stay at the surface. 20 minutes. We're good for another six months! As the newspaper columnist Laura Marcus quips, the male idea of a best friend is, "Someone they haven't seen for ten years!"

There is a lot of truth in that for me.

But let's take this one step further. Impoverished male relationships can result in lonely and isolated men. And in a culture that upholds masculine ideals of power, control, and dominance, lonely and isolated men can become very dangerous. There is an epidemic of male loneliness in our society and, if left untreated, the symptoms of impoverished masculinity can metastasize in violent and life-threatening ways.

1. The years 2019 and 2020 saw a decline in the life expectancy for American men for a third and fourth year in a row...*deaths of despair* they were called...rates rising as a result of alcoholism, drug overdose and suicide.

2. The #MeToo Movement has exposed in new ways how impoverished masculinity can turn toxic resulting in sexual violence, workplace harassment, and domestic abuse. Women are too often the primary victims of toxic and impoverished masculinity.

3. And in a country where aggression is expected of men, access to assault-style weapons is easy, and access to radical content on the internet is even easier, toxic masculinity can become radicalized for violent political ends. Even a cursory glance at the perpetrators of mass shootings, hate crimes, and alt-right insurrection will attest to a stark and noticeable gender imbalance.

Biblically speaking, King Saul fits the bill of one such man. Isolated. Cut off. Fearful. Controlling and politically vengeful. A man of impoverished standard who stands in stark contrast to his eldest son and his son's best friend.

We all need a true friend. But men, it seems, might benefit all the more from a Jonathan or two in their lives.

A Lonely Generation – But men aren't the only group with a heightened need for true friendship. It wouldn't be a message from the youth guy if I didn't comment on the epidemic of loneliness facing our younger sisters and brothers in Christ.

A recent study put out by one of my go-to research outfits, Springtide Research, bears the title, "*Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation.*" The authors of the study conclude that Gen Z (young people ages 13-25) report being the loneliest generation in American society right now. This generation of teens and young adults show disturbing and markedly high levels of stress, loneliness, and social isolation – and this is pre-pandemic. Many indicated they had few meaningful social interactions in a given week, and few people they could turn to in times of trouble or even just to talk.

In mapping the landscape of loneliness, Springtide discovered one in three of our young people feel completely alone much of the time, and nearly 40% have no one to talk to and feel left out. Despite remarkable high levels of participation in any number of clubs, sports, or religious programs, research finds that participation does not translate to belonging. In fact, nearly 25% of young people who attend worship gatherings weekly or more still feel as though no one understands them. An increase in religious identification is not associated with a rise in belonging.

Sometimes sitting in a pew where no one engages you can be the loneliest feeling in the world. And since it is Pride month, I would be remiss if I didn't recognize that the numbers, I just shared are all the higher among our LGBTQ teens and young adults. The key, according to the study, is to help teens create "belonging relationships" – a relationship that cultivates a feeling of belongingness in another. These relationships

have certain qualities: welcome, warmth, supportiveness, authenticity, vulnerability, invitation, acceptance, accountability. This sounds like Jonathan/David sorts of qualities to me.

And when this belonging relationship is forged with an adult across a generational line, the impact is all the greater! The presence of even a single trusted adult in their lives – someone who is present to listen and accept them for who they are – significantly decreases the experience of loneliness, social isolation, and stress. Increase this to two or three trusted adults and the levels go down even further.

A recent conversation with a Broadway parent bore this out. This parent was sharing how challenging it has been for them to connect with their pre-teen. Their once bouncy and talkative little child now seemingly lost behind a glowing screen and a pair of air pods. But this parent knew that there were people in their child's life who had connected with them over the years, first in Sunday School, later as a mentor in pastor's class. This parent reached out to these individuals and invited them into their child's life in structured ways. They meet periodically to engage in shared activity or just hang out and talk. This parent expressed deep gratitude that Broadway had brought other caring adults into their child's life to help create that "belonging relationship" at a time when their child needs it most.

And so, if you are mentoring one of our pastor's class students right now, or supporting Aimee, Taby, Crystal, and me, thank you. You are doing the sacred relational work that this generation is longing for.

The Invitation – This is our invitation, Broadway. This is what we are uniquely poised to create. A community of belonging relationships. We are called to cultivate the conditions and the climate where true friendship can flourish. Where on any given Sunday, or at any given function, you might enter this space and be warmly embraced in that David and Jonathan sort of way.

Let's continue to create a children's ministry where our youngest learners can form relationships of trust with loving adults who can remain in their lives long beyond the end of a program. Let us offer our kids an experience of baptismal prep that not only invites them into the waters of welcome and initiation, but also into the waters of mentored relationship with a member from our own community. Let us create a space where our teens and young adults, a generation struggling with loneliness and isolation, can encounter radical belonging and acceptance with each other and with adults who care. And let us create spaces of intimacy among our adult disciples. Circles of faith sharing and mutual support that make true friendship possible.

Spaces where men can experience the saving grace of intimacy on a men's rite of passage retreat. Where women can strengthen the bonds of sacred sisterhood through small groups and prayer experiences. Where everyone can be invited into that sacred center where we encounter Christ, the One who no longer calls us servants but calls us His friends.

For it is in Christ that we encounter the source of all true friendship because in the end, all true friendship is love. And all love flows forth from the eternal friendship expressed between Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit.

David and Jonathan knew this. We are called to embody this. So that all who enter might discover that rarest and most valued possession... a True Friend.

May it be so. Amen.

Song of Response
“My Soul Is Bound with Thee”
Words by Ed Varnum

Music: “My Faith Looks Up to Thee” (OLIVET) by Lowell Mason, 1832.

1. My soul is bound to thee,
dear friend, eternally, your heart with mine!
When we met that first day, I knew that I'd always stay
close by you come what may, my soul as thine.
2. Through you, God's grace imparts
strength to my fainting heart. your zeal inspires
faith, hope, and love in me, thoughts of eternity.
Through life's struggles, you, my friend, will lift me higher.