



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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925 74th Street ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Feb 13, 2004

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

I was invited some weeks ago to speak at Bravo on the subject of friendship. I sensed right from the beginning that the invitation was somewhat misplaced, because for large numbers of men from my generation friendships have not been a priority. Many of us men have had some rather intense and short-term bonding experiences, whether in war or athletics or work, but men have traditionally been far less motivated to develop enduring friendships than are women.

Many commentators attribute the longer life-expectancy of women partly to this fact, women have more friends. A popular book on my shelf from a generation ago reinforces this assertion by its title, "The Friendless American Male."

Pastor Mike's emphasis of late on becoming connected impresses me as being distinctly counter-cultural. When last Sunday he talked about how joy and truth hang out together, a joy that only is realized when it shared in community, he lays bare the crisis of American life. Men so often have acquaintances, companions, and teammates, but rarely close and intimate friends. An overwhelming number of married men name their spouse as their best friend, while a majority of women name a woman friend or friends.

Some years ago I made an impulsive and premature attempt to ease into something resembling retirement, but I flunked the grand experiment rather precipitously. This experience has caused me to undertake an intensive research project on the hows and whys of successful retiring, so that that the next plunge might not be so calamitous.

One early learning in this process was that helpful books on the subject of retirement are in short supply. Most of them seem to be written by financial planners who imply that if you have the money figured out, everything else will just take care of itself. "Show Me The Money" could be the title of these books. I was even tempted to try and write a book myself about what I was hoping to learn.

But fortunately I found a most incisive book entitled "Get A Life" by a Ralph Warner, who was truly tracking down

a similar path as I was. When he talked with people about retirement, hardly anyone was focusing on the issue of money, they were talking about values and priorities and new opportunities. In fact, when he asked people about the most important thing a middle-aged person could do to prepare for retirement, all came up with basically the same list:

- ◆ Learn new things.
- ◆ Develop lots of interests.
- ◆ Find useful ways to connect with the world.
- ◆ Cultivate important family relationships and friendships.
- ◆ Take steps to protect your health.

One of his best chapters is about friendship. "Whether you retire rich or poor, or somewhere in between, you almost surely will be poor in spirit unless you have both good friends and the skills to make more." He quotes a major study which concluded that strong friendships and health are the two most important factors in crafting a meaningful retirement. Older people who have few friends or relatives are much more likely to develop chronic illnesses. Warner asks the question, "When is the last time we have made a new friend>

I especially noticed the urgency of this question during this past Christmas when I went through the address book and crossed off several names of people who had died in the past year. My mother, who is 85 years old, has all of the names in her book written in pencil because she is removing so many of them every year. If we follow statistics, by the time we are age 65, one-quarter of our male friends will have died and 15% of our female friends.

Warner goes on to suggest that the best way to make new friends is to become involved in some kind of small group, some kind of volunteer group, some mission team. Of course! He echoes the words we hear at Hope, join a small group or a mission team and become connected.

Jesus took friendships seriously. He said to his disciples and to us, I call you servants no longer, I call you friends. You are my friends because I have taught you everything that I heard from my Father. You can know

that I am your friend because "greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

To be a friend of Jesus emboldens us. To be a friend involves partnership, mutual respect and trust. Friendship with Jesus is rich an multi-faceted, dynamic, like a precious jewel. The hymnwriter captured the essence and power of this image with the words, "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear." Later in the hymn he continues, "Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share?"

What does it mean that we are friends with Jesus. We believe that Jesus and we can count on each other, we can speak well of each other, we can intercede for each other, we can encourage and affirm and love the other, and we can know that we will never abandon each other. Friendship is meant to be a permanent personal relationship, which cannot be ended even by death.

The Scriptures include many powerful stories of friendships. In I Samuel 18-20 we have the amazing story of the friendship between David and Jonathan. Remember Jonathan is the son of King Saul, someone born to wealth and royalty. David is the humble shepherd boy, relegated to watching sheep. But in 18:3 David and Jonathan make an eternal covenant, promising to be friends no matter what, giving their friendship highest priority.

Later the friendship will be severely tested as Jonathan's father, the increasingly paranoid Saul, turns on David and tries to kill him. Jonathan does not abandon his friend and several times warns David to flee. The friendship continues over several chapters and obviously many years. David's passionate and heart-felt lament upon the death of Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1:19-27 is one of the most eloquent in the Scriptures.

We also have the story of enduring friendship between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, found in the book of Ruth. Naomi and her husband had moved from Bethlehem to Moab with her husband and two sons because of a terrible famine. Both sons grew to adulthood and married local women from the area, named Ruth and Orpah (not Oprah). But tragically, both Naomi's husband and her two sons all died within a short period of time, leaving the three women alone together as widows.

After some soul-searching Naomi decides it is time to return to her home country. Both daughter-in-laws express a desire to accompany her. Naomi protests, encouraging both women to stay in their own land, near their own families. Orpah follows this advice and returns home. But Ruth declares her friendship with Naomi in

words which have echoed down through the centuries:

"Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die and there will I be buried."

A third story of friendship comes from the New Testament, Mark 2. Five men were close friends, most likely had been friends for a long time. However, one of the friends was paralyzed and spent virtually all of his time confined to his bed. Yet his friends did not abandon him, were not averse at picking up his bed and taking him with them.

When Jesus came to town, the friends suddenly had an inspiration. Why not bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus, so he could be healed? They began to dream about a miracle for their friend. So one day they picked up their friend and his bed and carried him to the house where Jesus was teaching. Unfortunately the crowds were so large that this convey could not even get near the front door.

But love finds a way, and these friends had a sudden inspiration. "Why don't we raise the roof?" Up they went onto the roof and the next thing the people in the house noticed was a hole in the ceiling right over Jesus. No doubt the owner of the house was not consulted. Then the bed was fastened to ropes and lowered into the house, where the man would be healed. What amazing love, these men bringing their friend to Jesus.

Friends are usually good for your health, for your faith, for your joy in life. Find friends through a church like Hope, through Purpose Driven Life, through Alpha, through support groups or mission teams. Michael W Smith inspires us with his song "Friends."

"And friends are friends forever if the Lord's the Lord of them.

And a friend will not say "Never" Cause the welcome will not end.

Though its hard to let you go In the Father's hand we know

That a lifetime's not too long To live as friends."