

May 19, 2013 - The True Friend

We are in the third week of a series of lessons that we have entitled “Spiced” and the premise of the series is that, just like when you are cooking, when you don’t put in all the right spices and all the right flavourings, your dish turns out a little bland, it seems to be missing something. It might be edible, but it’s not quite as good as it could have been if you had all the right ingredients in it. The premise that we are suggesting, is that life is kind of that way too. There are certain things and specifically, certain relationships that you need in your life, and when you have them in your life, your life is just a little bit more full; a little bit more vibrant and when they’re missing, it’s still O.K., you can get by but it’s just not quite as good as it could be. We have been looking through some stories in the Bible that kind of highlight some of those different relationships that exist and that we need to add to our ‘spice rack’ of life, if you would.

I was thinking this week if we’re doing a series on spice at some point I have to stop and kind of think back about the spicy things I’ve eaten in my life. I’ve had my fair share and I was trying to think of what was the spiciest thing that I have ever eaten. There is a list. I’ve eaten curry. Both the Indian curry and the Thai curry and I’ve had those in varying degrees of spiciness and I’ve had some that are indeed, very, very spicy. So that ranked Number 3, on my list.

Number 2 on my list is Wasabi which is this little green paste that you often have with Sushi. I remember the first time I had Wasabi, I was having Sushi at a friend’s house and they suggested that I try some. They didn’t recommend the portion which I tried it. If you’ve never had Wasabi, it’s kind of like horseradish on steroids. It is very spicy. It’s very hot. I took one nice big bite and that ranks Number 2 on my spice list.

Number 1 on my spice list comes again from India when I was there in 2005 with a group of people. I dug this picture out. Robert’s face kind of jumps out at you. If you look at John’s face, he’s kind of looking at me and I’m trying to figure out why that look is being directed at me at this moment. It’s interesting what you catch on pictures. We were at this restaurant one night we were actually having a special birthday supper for Ellen McMillan who was stationed there at the time and you can’t really spot it but right in the middle of the table there’s this little dish. In this dish was peppers. We kind of looked at these peppers throughout the meal and at the end of the meal, there was peppers and this juice that they were in and someone suggested that we should try some. This is the face I made after trying the peppers. To my recollection, that is the spiciest thing that I have ever tried. It took me awhile to get that taste out of my mouth and to get the burning to stop.

Maybe you have tried some spicy things in your life, as well. As we thought about this series, this week I began to contemplate the value of different spices and what spices are worth. I discovered that the most expensive spice in the World is Saffron. I’ve looked at that and thought that didn’t look too exceptional and so I wondered what made Saffron such

an expensive spice. I knew that that was the case, right, that Saffron was one of the more expensive ones. When I did some research, I found out that Saffron can cost you between \$2,000 and \$10,000 dollars, a pound. Wow! There has got to be something special about that spice to bring in that kind of price tag.

Here's what I found out. Saffron comes from the blue Crocus. It's just the little red things sitting inside the flower. Part of what makes it so expensive is that, those little red things in the flower have to be hand-picked out of each flower to create the Saffron spice. It takes somewhere between 200-500 flowers to make one gram of Saffron. Now that's a pretty labour intensive enterprise for you. The other thing that I learned that was really interesting is that, the blue Crocus is self-incompatible, is what they call it. Which means, it cannot be pollinated by another blue crocus, it has to be pollinated by some other kind of crocus but if you cross-pollinate a blue crocus and something other crocus, you end up with, not a pure blue Crocus. So blue Crocuses are therefore, hard to get and hard to maintain and hard to regenerate, so that also adds to their great value and worth.

I was thinking about that this week and I was thinking about all the jars that we have on our spice rack. If I was going to pick one of the things that we're going to talk about in the next few weeks to be our Saffron, in our spice rack, today's lesson would be the one that I pick. Much like Saffron, a true friend is rare, is extremely valuable, and requires an enormous amount of time and effort to cultivate.

There are lots of people who have much to say about true friends and what true friends bring, the great baseball legend Ty Cobb, near the end of his life in about 1961, he said: "If I had the chance to live my life over, I would do things a little different and I would have more friends." I thought that was a profound statement from a guy who was, in some senses, on top of the World in his time.

Great Roman philosopher named Cicero, wrote this. He said: "If when I die, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of true friends I have, I would be the wealthiest person on the planet." He says if I could get this many true friends in my life then I would be wealthier than anyone else around.

The Bible says this about true friends in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, he says: "Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble."

Lots of things to be said about true friends. I dug out some other quotes about true friends. Here are some of my favourites that I came across this week:

"A true friend is one who overlooks your failures and tolerates your successes." That was profound.

“A true friend is someone who is there for you when he’s rather be anywhere else.” And that’s very true.

“A true friend never gets in your way unless you happen to be going down.” I like that one.

“A true friend walks in when the rest of the World walks out.” A true friend is rare and extremely valuable.

So our text this morning is about a true friendship that we see in the Old Testament. A friendship between Jonathan and David. It’s actually a well-known friendship but it’s a surprisingly short story if you read it in the Bible which kind of shocked me a little bit this week as I reviewed. The story starts actually, in 1Samuel, Chapter 17, and this is the story of David and Goliath which is a story, if you haven’t heard it, it’s about David who is a young boy. He comes out to see the army of Israel who is kind of, at a standoff with the Philistine army because the Philistine army has this giant. The giant has challenged the Israelites to one-on-one combat and no one has the guts to go out and face him. So David, he was just a young shepherd boy, he comes out and he gets his sling shot and swings a stone around and fires the stone away. He gets Goliath right in the middle of the forehead and Goliath falls down and David kills him. So this is the big grand success of David and the big start of his rise to fame in Israel.

Immediately after that story in 1Samuel 18, here is what we read:

“After David had finished talking with Saul, he met Jonathan, the King’s son. There was an immediate bond of love between them. They became the best of friends. From that day on, Saul kept David with him and wouldn’t let him return home. Jonathan made a solemn pact with David because he loved him, as he loved himself. Jonathan sealed the pact by taking off his robe and giving it to David together with his tunic and his sword, and his bow and his belt.”

So right off the start, there is this bond between Jonathan and David. They are close. They are tied together and Jonathan immediately loves David as he loves himself. But it’s not long afterwards, really just about two verses afterwards, that there is trouble in paradise and David continues to engage in military campaigns and so when they come back from these great battles, the people start cheering and they start cheering that ‘Saul has killed his thousands but David has killed his ten thousands’ and that doesn’t sit very well with Saul. So in 1Samuel, 18:6-10, we read that Saul gets upset with David kind of stealing his limelight a little bit and so, while David is sitting there playing his harp, Saul throws a spear at him, actually twice, throws a spear at him and tries to, it literally says in the Bible “Saul said to himself ‘I will pin David to the wall.’” And that’s where the relationship between Saul and David had gone very quickly.

It doesn’t end there because in Chapter 19, Jonathan steps in and Saul is furious with David

and he's ready to kill David and Jonathan steps in and the first thing he does is, he runs to David and says "David, you need to lie low for a little while because my dad is out to get you. Just lie low for a little while and give me a moment to talk to him." Then he goes back to Saul and he says to his father, he says "Saul, you don't really want to do this, David really hasn't done anything against you. David is a good guy. You need to restore your relationship with him." He actually convinces his father to take David back. So David comes back into the palace and it actually says "that David and Saul were just as they were before." Now, that's a pretty powerful thing for someone to take a guy who wants to kill another guy and restore their friendship back to where it was in the beginning. A pretty powerful thing for someone to actually want to step into the middle of all that, don't you think?

So, following that experience, unfortunately, it doesn't last very long and we get to Chapter 20, which is the part that we read just a few minutes ago. "And once again, Saul is angry with David." So they go out to the field and David and Jonathan they make this plan and Jonathan says "here's what will happen, we'll do like you said. You skip the feast and if my father gets angry, I'll come out here and here's what I'll do. I'll bring my bow and arrow and I'll shoot an arrow out into the field and then I'll tell the young man who is with me to go fetch my arrow. If everything is safe, I'll say 'Look, the arrow is close to you. The arrow is on this side of you. Come back.' And that will be a sign to you to know that it is safe to come back and you can come out of hiding and you can come home. But if I say to the young man 'Go further, the arrow is beyond you' then you know that it is not safe and you need to run away and you need to hide and you need to get away for good."

And so the day comes and David skips the feast and on the first day, Saul doesn't make much of a deal about it, but on the second day, he finds out and he gets very angry about it so Jonathan actually leaves the feast and he comes out to the field and he shoots an arrow out into the field where David is hiding and he tells the boy "Go farther! Go farther and find the arrow." So the boy goes out and he finds the arrow and after he finds the arrow, here is what happens in 1 Samuel, Chapter 20, verse 41, it says:

"As soon as the boy was gone, David came out from where he had been hiding near a stone pile. Then David bowed three times to Jonathan with his face to the ground. Both of them were in tears as they embraced each other and said goodbye, especially David."

You see, David knew something. He knew that he was losing something far more valuable than his place in the palace. He was losing his true friend. He would not find another friend like Jonathan for the rest of his lifetime. There were certain points, if you read the rest of David's story, there were certain points in his lifetime when you think: "Man, if David had still had Jonathan in his life, this would have gone a lot differently. It would have gone a lot better." And that's why David was so sad. He was in tears as he separated from Jonathan, because he knew he was losing a true friend.

Which begs the question, if we all value and desire true friends, then why don't more of us have them? You would think if this is something that we all want we would have a bunch of them, wouldn't we? Wouldn't that be great if we all had this whole pack of good friends? Of true friends, to surround us, but most of us do not experience that. There are three reasons that I call 'our enemies of friendship'. These are the things that we actually, most of the time, do to ourselves, that kind of prevent us from having that David/Jonathan type of relationship with people.

The first thing is, we struggle to be real with each other. We struggle to be open and transparent with each other. It has been observed by many people, that in our modern culture, what people are looking for more than anything, they are looking for networks more than friendship. We value the people around us based on what they can give us. The old saying is "it's not what you know, it's who you know" and we want to know someone who is going to be of value to us. Who is going to get us somewhere. Who is going to do something for us. That's why we have internet sites like "Linked in". Linked in is a site where I know several of you are on because several of you have connected with me on Linked in. What it is, it's this place where you can go and I can connect with all my friends and then I get connected with all their friends and so on...It's actually done in a very business environment so that you can get contacts and references and networks far outside your own sphere. That's kind of how we view people a lot these days. They are networking people. They are people that we can use to get somewhere, to get something. We tend to build networks with people who will take us somewhere instead of building friendships with those who will be with us where we are.

The second thing we struggle with is going deep. We have many acquaintances and many people we know, but very few true friends. We kind of live in a World where we have all these pseudo-relationships, and probably the epitome of it and you've probably already thought of it, the epitome of this kind of phenomenon is Facebook, right? I read a statistic that showed a chart of how many friends people have on Facebook. It's broken down by age group. The younger ages from like 13-28, that age group has about 500 friends, on average. Now, if I thought about the people I could have a real relationship with, I don't know what the number would be, but I guarantee you, it's a lot lower than 500. If you're on Facebook you probably have a number of friends. I have friends on there and it's all those friends from high school that I haven't talked to in years and years and years but somehow we got friend requested and got connected and so, now I have them on my friend list. Somehow that makes me feel like I am friends with them but my relationship with them really doesn't go much deeper than what they made for supper last night, right? They'll post that! I don't really know who they are or what they're about so this phenomenon is kind of giving us these pseudo-relationships, these shallow relationships and so we know all this useless minutia, but we don't have any real personal connection. One newspaper columnist has said this: "The typical male idea of a best friend is someone they haven't seen for ten years." I ask all the men, think of who your best friend is, how many of your best friends are guys you really haven't spent any time with for four/five/ten years. I know some people I would list as my

best friends are people I went to college with. Maybe went to high school with. That was a long time ago. But we do that, we don't have the deep relationships with each other.

Probably the biggest thing that keeps from having true friendships is that, a true friendship requires us to give our all to someone else. If you saw the first Harry Potter movie, there is this scene where Harry and Ron and Hermione, they're trying to get to this place to save the day and they come across this giant chess board with huge, huge, chess pieces. They realize, to get beyond here, they're going to have to play the chess game, but it's real chess. It's wizards chess, the pieces actually move and they actually shatter each other to pieces when they take over another square. And so, Ron and Harry get on two different pieces and they start playing this game and they reach this one point where everything kind of freezes and then everything is still and the realization dawns on them that Ron is going to have to sacrifice his piece and have to move to a spot where his piece will be taken, so that Harry can go past and get through and go on to save the day. In doing so, Ron's piece moves right into harms way and the queen from the other team comes along and takes the big sword and just crashes the horse that Ron is sitting on and Ron goes rolling across the stage. That's what a true friend does. A true friend is willing to sacrifice himself for another.

In the Bible, in John, Chapter 3:27-30, John the Baptist is out teaching and someone just, his followers come to him and say "Jesus is on the other side of the river and he's teaching and the bottom line is, we're losing people to this Jesus guy, everyone's going to him, he's becoming the main guy. John what are we going to do about this?" And it says in Verse 27 "To this John replied: 'A man can receive only what is given him from Heaven. You yourselves, can testify that I have said I am not the Christ but I was sent ahead of him. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and attends and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine and is now complete. He must become greater, I must become less.'"

Only a true friend can say "He must become greater. I must become less." Only a true friend can say "Your success is more important than mine. Your value is greater than mine. I am going to put you ahead of myself."

Here is what one commentator described Jonathan as. He says: "A Jonathan is willing to give their all for another. 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 is the first call in good times or in bad. A Jonathan gives and gives and wants no payment. A Jonathan walks with you in all seasons. A Jonathan has seen the real you. A Jonathan keeps you in check when you want what you can't have. A Jonathan grants you grace when you take him or her for granted. And a Jonathan sacrifices himself for you, even knowing as the original Jonathan knew, that the more your song rises, the more his or her own song fades into the background."

That's what Jonathan was willing to do for David. You see, what you don't realize or what you may not realize if you haven't read the whole story, is that Jonathan was the son of the

King but David was the future king. And so that the more David grew in popularity and the more David rose and ascended toward the throne, the more Jonathan saw the throne slip away from him. But Jonathan was okay with that because he was a true friend to David. Now, not everyone was quite as okay with it. In that same story that we read earlier, when Saul gets upset at David not being there. In Verse 30, here's what Saul does and here is what he says:

“Saul’s anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, “You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don’t I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse (and I think it’s telling that he won’t actually say David’s name but just calls him ‘son of Jesse) to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? As long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send someone to bring him to me, for he must die!” “Why should he be put to death? What has he done?” Jonathan asked his father. But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David.

Two things I learned from that:

1. If you’re near Saul and he picks up a spear, start running. It’s not good news.
2. The second thing I learned is that Saul realized that the more David grew in acclaim and the more David grew in popularity; and the more David grew in military victories, he said “I can see David rising towards the throne and as long as that’s happening, Jonathan, your throne and your kingdom and your legacy is never going to be established. So I’m willing to end David’s life to preserve this.

And Jonathan says “You know what? I’m willing to diminish to that he can increase, because I am his true friend. Until we are able to feel and to go deep and to give our all, true friendship like David and Jonathan shared will remain beyond our grasp.

That’s exactly what Christ calls us to do. If you look at John, Chapter 15:12-14, Jesus talks to his disciples and he says:

“This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.”

So, what do we do to get that true friend in our life? Well, the reality is, you need a Jonathan in your life. You need at least one Jonathan in your life. Now getting them is a lot more tricky. They are hard to come by. They are rare and they are valuable and those relationships take huge amounts of time and energy to cultivate. In the end, really, the best thing you can do to get a true friend is to simply pray and to say “God, I need a true friend in my life who can be that Jonathan for me and I don’t know where he’s going to come from but

I'm going to trust in you to send him to me. Because you have no control over the way any of your friends act towards you. You can't make someone be a friend to you, so pray and ask God to send you one.

But the most important lesson out of David and Jonathan is not that you need a true friend, the most important thing for us to realize, is that someone else needs you to be a true friend to them. Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan in Luke, Chapter 10. Someone comes to him and tries to trick him and he tries to bail himself out and asks Jesus the question: "Who is my neighbour?" And he says: "Who is my neighbour, Jesus?" And so Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan. Guy going down the road, get's beat up and a priest walks by and a Levite walks by and finally a Samaritan stops and helps him and takes him to the inn and cares for him. At the end of the story, a story that had been prompted by the question: "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus closes the story with the question: "Who was a neighbour?" And I think that's the same question we get asked when we start talking about true friends.

Now, who is going to be my true friend? But rather, "Who can I be a true friend to?" And you won't have those deep personal relationships with everyone. You can't do that it's just not possible. However, what you can do is you can treat someone as a true friend no matter who they are. No matter how well you know them, no matter how they choose to treat you. Just imagine for a minute, if we took that list of descriptors that we walked through a minute ago and we applied that list to all of our interactions with other people, what would happen if we were willing to give our all for another person? If we believed in people when no one else did? If we were loyal when people make it hard to be loyal? If we were the first to reach out to people in good times or bad? If we gave to those we knew would never repay us? If we walked with people in all seasons of life, in joy, in grief, in pain, in loss, in celebration. What if we were the ones who looked beyond the surface to see who people really were? What if we granted grace to others when they take us for granted? What if we sacrificed ourselves for others even knowing that the more their song rises the more our song would fade into the background? That sounds an awful lot like the way Jesus lived. It sounds an awful lot like the way Jesus treated people. It sounds an awful lot like the way Jesus has treated me and if he can do that, for me, the very least I can do is do the same for you.