

A LOVE CALLED FRIENDSHIP

1 Samuel 18: 1-9; Mark 9: 2-8; John 15: 12-15

Martha and Jackie first met at university. There were fewer women at university then. They became close quickly, relying on each other through all the twists and turns of university life. Jackie was a target of male attention, much of it unwelcome. She put up with it, preferring to survive and be liked rather than creating roadblocks for herself. But Martha saw what was happening and challenged her friend to stand up for her freedom and independence as a woman. Jackie learned so much from Martha and she leaned on her confidence and strength.

After university, Jackie got a good job at an energy company in another part of the country. Her personal life, though, was not so good. The men she met were not the commitment type. Martha's situation was the reverse. After a short stint at an insurance company, she met a senior manager and soon they were a couple. Within a year, Martha was married and pregnant and her focus had turned to home life. That sounded great in letters, but when Jackie went to visit Martha over the holidays she was shocked to see a friend she remembered so strong, confident and ready to speak her mind, having turned into a submissive and dutiful wife. Once the husband went to bed and the little one was settled, Jackie confronted Martha with what she was witnessing. Her friend's response revealed a passivity that shocked Jackie. But worse than that, Martha was defensive, accusing her friend of being jealous for not having found a man herself... Well, the rest of their time together was cordial but tense. The husband was tolerating Jackie taking up his wife's time and focus but was looking forward to her departure.

Over the next few years communication between Jackie and Martha ground to a halt minus some polite exchanges over the phone and some holiday cards back and forth. But then, one night, Jackie got a call. It was Martha, only Jackie didn't recognize the voice on the other end. "He's gone," Martha said. "There's nothing left." Martha's husband had worked through all their funds gambling and carousing. He had left her a brief note saying he was sorry. The house would be repossessed by the bank. Martha was left with a child, but no job, no money and no family to count on. Jackie knew right away what she had to do. "Martha, let me book a flight for you and Chloe right away. You are coming to stay with me."

Martha, little Chloe, and her aunt Jackie built a house together over the next decade. Martha, found her strength and her voice again. She began to work. Jackie eventually met Phil and moved out on her own. But Phil knew that Martha and Chloe would always be family.

Then there were the years Jackie struggled with crippling depression. Martha was there to wash her, feed her and care for her when Phil just didn't know what to do. Some years later

she was also there for Jackie when Phil was diagnosed with a tumour in his spine. Together they cared for him until he died. Now in their senior years, Jackie and Martha were enjoying visits with Chloe and her partner Sally. They decided to buy a condo together. They were 'friends for life and beyond' as they would say to describe their relationship. Through disagreements, conflicts, tears, reunions and reconciliations... through sharing sorrows and joys... through giving and receiving... through trusting each other with everything... their friendship went deep. What a gift.

So, what is it about friendship that makes it such a gift? What is it about friendship that makes it a unique kind of love? We don't choose our families, but we do choose our friends. And even though we may like someone and enjoy them, to call someone a friend in a way that means something, requires something more. There must be a sharing that happens, a giving and receiving, a listening with openness rather than judgement. Listening with openness builds trust over time, and trust leads to a deeper sharing of vulnerabilities and concerns. Shared values are formed. We are shaped by our friendships and we grow as persons through them.

For friendship to grow, however, there must also be honesty and truthfulness. This means a friendship must grow through disagreement and even conflict, finding a way to embrace the other person beyond differences. In fact, to see each other and cherish each other as unique human beings rather than pressuring the other to become more like us is essential to genuine friendship. If I don't become more truly myself through a friendship, then it is not a genuine friendship.

Ok, preacher. If friendship is such a beautiful kind of love, why is it so rare in our world? According to research coming out of the U.K, paralleling similar findings in other developed nations like our own Canada, loneliness and social isolation are prevalent problems and they lead to depression, unhappiness and poor health. Friendship and social connection are the greatest antidote. So why are they not happening more than they are?

Let us seek out some revelatory insight through our scripture readings. And let's begin with the story of a friendship that is as unlikely as could be: David and Jonathan. Why unlikely? Well, Jonathan's father is Saul. Saul is the king. But the prophet Samuel has told King Saul he's on his way out. He has not been faithful in following God's call for him as king. Saul has refused to accept this. But he has also started looking over his shoulder, getting obsessively suspicious of anyone and everyone. Who's going to challenge his kingship? Who's going to get the support of the people over him?

Well, there's a young man, a shepherd, named David. David's star is rising. He's the only one with the courage to take on the giant Philistine warrior Goliath, using creativity rather than brawn to defeat him. David's victory inspires the army and they achieve a great victory over the

Philistines. David is the new hero. We already know that David has been secretly anointed by Samuel to take over as king some day. But no one else knows it. What Saul knows is that David is becoming popular. Is he the one who will threaten his kingship? Saul welcomes David into his court and into his family. It's a way to keep tabs on him.

But then there's Jonathan, the king's biological son. Everything that happens with Jonathan should not typically happen. Jonathan is the next in line to his father's throne. Jonathan is popular too. He's a great warrior, handsome, regal and highly respected by the army and the people. He, too, sees what's happening with the outsider David growing his popularity as a hero. But does Jonathan resent it? Does he see David as a threat, a competitor for the throne? Does he fear his own fate and his own future? No. He not only embraces David. Something happens within Jonathan. He comes to love David. We read: "When David finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul." We also read: "Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt." Wow!

The language of covenant is important here. A covenant is a sacred vow, like a marriage. That's the kind of friendship Jonathan and David shared. They bound themselves to each other for life. And this was tested, severely. As King Saul's suspicions of David grew, he became hostile, attempting to kill David more than once in a fit of rage. And even though Jonathan loved his father and was loyal to him to the death, he not only stood up for David, but even suffered his father's wrath. Jonathan knew that David could very well oust his father as king. This would mean Jonathan would never become king. No matter. He and David were bound together by a love greater than status, power, competition, secrecy, deceit, jealousy and all those things that undermine the development of genuine friendship.

And this, my friends, is a key reason why friendship and meaningful social connections don't happen more in our world today. We are so driven by the false values of status, power, competition, secrecy, deceit, jealousy and individualism, that the greater value of friendship is undermined. We need to purge a false individualism and the false promise of the happiness competitive success will bring. We need to make space in our lives for genuine friendship and genuine connection. The promise of a community like Armour Heights church is to become an authentic space where people can be who they are, and we can engage one another authentically, not competitively but from the heart.

And this brings us to our gospel readings. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," Jesus declares. I know many of us wouldn't think twice about laying down our lives for a parent, a sibling or a child. But do we have the kind of connection with a friend that would bind us that way heart and soul? Friendship like David and Jonathan shared, as short

lived as it was, is a gift. Jonathan and Saul were killed in battle. David grieved his friend's death over a lifetime. But whether we ever experience friendship approximating that kind or not, the bible also tells us that this kind of love is the kind God wants to cultivate with us. How is that?

In our first gospel reading, Jesus and those closest to him go up on a mountain. They experience something astonishing. Jesus is glorified before them. The word used is: transfigured. This is intended to inspire and strengthen their faith. The disciples are students of the greatest of lords and masters. But as Jesus is coming to the end of his life on earth, he wants something more. He wants their relationship to progress from teacher/student and master/servant to one of friendship. Friendship means not only a one way giving and receiving but a two way. Even though God knows us inside out, engaging God with our thoughts, words and actions is a way of inviting and growing a relationship more like a friendship. God seeks our love as much as we depend on God's love. In all our interactions and commitments in the world we are bringing God into our awareness, our decisions, our struggles, our pain, our joys and our gratitude. There is transparency, there are no secrets, there is trust even as we cannot control or know many things. Whatever comes we know we will journey through it all with God above us, beside us and within us, and this will make all the difference how we journey through our living, struggling, loving, dying and rising again.

"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." "You are my friends... if you love one another as I have loved you." Some of us will understand the call to love as Jesus calls us to love through special friendships in our lives. But all of us are called to live out something of this love as we share with one another in fellowship, worship and outreach together in Christian community.

And all of us are called to such a relationship with God. Jesus wants us to share with God what he has with God in him. Jesus is not just the son of God but in communion with God, so much so that he and God are one. We are called to share in such communion too, with all our imperfect humanity. Learning communion with God in our core can help us become more open to others around us. Learning communion with God in our core can open us up to learn the art of friendship and human connection as an antidote to loneliness.

Life can be hard. But going through life alone is even harder. Finding a path to friendship with others, a path to connection with others, a path to communion with God as the ground of our being – that is the path for all of us, each and every one.

Let us pray: Come to us, O God, not only as God above us, but as God beside and within us... reveal yourself to us through the people around us... open us up to the gift of friendship love and human connection... Amen.