

HOW DO YOU DEFINE 'FRIEND'?  
 (or, "How Will You Welcome  
 Your New Pastor?")  
 II Samuel 1:17-27 – TEV  
 June 28, 2009 – Ordinary Time – 13  
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA – Rock Hill  
 James T. Richardson

*(NOTE: The Scripture passage is read within the body of the sermon.)*

Today is really a transition Sunday for OAPC. It is the transition from an Interim Pastor to the new Pastor. While I do not want you to think that I am **“grandiose”** in the change from Jim to Jim, the thing that kept running through my mind was what I have read somewhere that is said in a monarchy at the death of a king:

***“The king is dead!” - “Long live the king!”***

*“Jim Richardson is leaving!” - “Jim Simpson is arriving!”*

Do you understand what I am saying and feeling?

One of the things that has come to my mind is an Old Testament proverb which says:

***“There are friends who pretend to be friends,  
 but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”***  
 (Proverbs 18:24; RSV)

All of this came to mind this past week as I was preparing for my last worship service with you and I was wrestling with the Old Testament passage which is in the Common Lectionary for this Sunday. The passage is basically a lament over the deaths of King Saul and his son Jonathan.

Now, if you are familiar with the story,

- (1) there was bad blood between King Saul and David, and
- (2) there was a beautiful friendship between  
 King Saul's son, Jonathan, and David.

Here is the setting for today's story.

You will recall that King Saul was the first king anointed by the prophet Samuel to lead the Children of Israel as they sought to solidify their hold on the land of Canaan, "the promised land," the land of the Philistines.

Last Sunday we remembered the battle between **Goliath**, the giant Philistine soldier, and **David**, the little Israelite shepherd boy. And David killed Goliath. **The point of the story of David and Goliath was to glorify God.**

The Book of I Samuel tells us two interesting things right after the story of David and Goliath.

(1) We are told that King Saul's son Jonathan was "knit to the soul of David" (18:1). They became fast and best friends. And the close friendship lasted a lifetime.

(2) The second thing we are told is that King Saul begins to lose his mind; he starts on the road to insanity. The way the Bible puts it is that "an evil spirit" rushed upon King Saul. And one evidence of this "evil spirit" is that King Saul becomes jealously suspicious of David and on several occasions tries to kill David.

In the course of the story, David, in fear for his life, keeps away from the king and gradually begins to bring together some of his followers in a guerilla army band. At one point, David is in such opposition to the King that he goes to live with the Philistines !

As the first book of Samuel draws to a close, the army of King Saul is fighting with the Philistine army. In that battle, the three sons of King Saul, **Abinadab**, **Malchishua**, **Jonathan**, are all killed by the Philistine army. And King Saul himself is badly wounded.

Fearing that the Philistines will torture him if they find him so badly wounded, King Saul

falls upon his own sword, committing suicide.

When the Philistines find his body, they cut off his head, put his armor on display in one of their pagan temples, and hang his body on the outside of one of their city walls.

The Book of I Samuel ends with these words:

***But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bethshan; and they came to Jabesh and burnt them there. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted seven days.***  
(I Samuel 31:11-13; RSV)

The passage for today is found in Chapter #1 of The Second Book of Samuel, and immediately there is a contradictory story concerning the death of King Saul. This chapter has a messenger coming to tell David that King Saul is dead. However, instead of King Saul killing himself, the messenger says that he killed King Saul. The way that the messenger put it was this way:

***By chance I happened to be on Mount Gilboa; and there was Saul leaning upon his spear; and lo, the chariots and the horsemen were close upon him. And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. And I answered, "Here I am." And he said to me, "Who are you?" I answered him, "I am an Amalekite." And he said to me, "Stand beside me and slay me; for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still linger." So, I stood beside him, and slew him, because I was sure that he could not live after he had fallen; and I took the crown which was on his head and the armlet which was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord.*** (I Samuel 1:6-10; RSV)

At this point, David and all of his men with him, wept and mourned for the loss of

***"Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel because they had fallen by the sword."***  
(II Samuel 1:12; RSV)

Then David, perhaps out of respect for the office of the King, the Lord's Anointed, against whom even he had refused to raise his sword, ordered that the messenger be killed because he had killed the King.

So, what do you think happened?

- (1) Did King Saul actually kill himself?
- (2) Or, did the messenger kill the King as he said?
- (3) Or, did the messenger find the king already dead, steal the crown and the armlet from the dead body, bringing it to David in the hopes of a reward?

One cannot be sure.

But of one thing you can be sure: David mourned and lamented all the tragedy that had occurred, especially the death of his close friend, Jonathan.

And it is at this point that I want to read to you the passage which is listed in the

Common Lectionary as our Old Testament lesson for today: **II Samuel 1:17-27 (TEV):**

- 17 David sang this lament for Saul and his son Jonathan,  
 18 and ordered it to be taught to the people of Judah. (It is recorded in *The Book of Jashar*.)  
 19 “On the hills of Israel our leaders are dead! The bravest of our soldiers have fallen!  
 20 Do not announce it in Gath or in the streets of Ashkelon. Do not make the women of Philistia glad; do not let the daughters of pagans rejoice.  
 21 May no rain or dew fall on Gilboa’s hills; may its fields be always barren! For the shields of the brave lie there in disgrace; the shield of Saul is no longer polished with oil.  
 22 Jonathan’s bow was deadly, the sword of Saul was merciless, striking down the mighty, killing the enemy.  
 23 Saul and Jonathan, so wonderful and dear, together in life, together in death; swifter than eagles, stronger than lions.  
 24 Women of Israel, mourn for Saul! He clothed you in rich scarlet dresses and adorned you with jewels and gold.  
 25 The brave soldiers have fallen, they were killed in battle. Jonathan lies dead in the hills.  
 26 I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan; how dear you were to me! How wonderful was your love for me, better even than the love of women.  
 27 The brave soldiers have fallen, their weapons abandoned and useless.”

**So, what do you think about these words of David?**

There is not the slightest hint of the breach between David and King Saul.

There is not a single negative innuendo cast in the dead king’s direction.



She stayed to comfort them, then went on in her search for a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in hovels and in palaces, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune.

Ultimately, she became so involved in ministering to other people’s grief that she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had in fact driven the sorrow out of her life.

(Kushner, Harold, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, New York, Shoken Books, 1981, pp.110-111)

One of the things that comes out of today’s passage is the necessity and the importance of grief. If you have lost a loved one, grieve that loved one, mourn that loved one, love that loved one, and thank God for that loved one.

And then get on with living your life!

(That is what you and I must do in grieving our pastoral separation.)

**( II )**  
**THE SECOND THING THAT COMES OUT OF TODAY’S PASSAGE IS THE NECESSITY AND IMPORTANCE OF A FRIEND.**

Now, David and King Saul’s son, Jonathan, were very close friends. All throughout the problems and estrangements of Saul and David, there was a true and deep friendship between David and Jonathan.

Upon the deaths of King Saul and his three sons in the battle with the Philistines, we are told that David mourned the death of Jonathan. The other two sons of King Saul, **Abinadab** and **Malchishua**, are not even mentioned, either in the prose or the poetry of this first chapter. David and Jonathan were close friends, even closer than the love between a man and a woman. They epitomized the Proverb which says:

*“There are friends who pretend to be friends,  
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”*  
(Proverbs 18:24; RSV)

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I was working as Director of Admissions at Columbia Theological Seminary when, in 1971, after 40 years, President J. McDowell Richards retired. My memory is that Professor Charles B. Cousar served as Interim President until the Board of Directors called Dean Ben Kline to become the new President. Interim President Charles B. Cousar knew well both J. McDowell Richards and Dean Benton Kline; he was a friend to both and he made the transition easy in the Office of President of Columbia Seminary.

It is my prayer that as your Interim Pastor I have made it easy in the transition to your new Pastor, Jim Simpson, and that God is going to bless your union.

***“There are friends who pretend to be friends,  
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”***  
(Proverbs 18:24; RSV)

I am praying that there will be no “pretense” among us here at OAPC.

What about YOU ?