
SUNDAY, JULY 11, 2010
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Luke 10:25-37 (Getting by with a little help from our friends)

TODAY'S SERMON THEME:

It takes less than a second to decide to turn away from a needy person, or to get involved. The blink of an eye. Yet if we strive to see the world through the Lord's eyes, we suddenly realize that we belong to each other -- all of us -- through the bonds of friendship forged for us by God. We are friends, one to another. Friends in Christ Jesus. And we are commanded to care for one another, and especially for those who are hurting.

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- 1. There are certain moments in life, usually unexpected moments, when time finally catches up with us. When we suddenly realize that we are no longer as young as we used to be. One of those moments happened to me just last week: Last Wednesday, July 7, 2010.** That was the day RINGO STARR turned 70 years old. Yes. The mop-haired, always-smiling drummer for the Beatles is now 70. Richard Starkey, aka "Ringo Starr," was born on July 7, 1940, in Liverpool, England. He joined the Beatles in 1962, replacing original drummer Pete Best, and he stayed with the band until their breakup in 1970. Ringo seldom sang, but he provided the rhythmic glue that held the group together during their touring years (through 1966) and their studio years (through-1970). Ringo is still out there singing and performing, touring the world with a smile and a song. But as I reflected on Ringo this past week, I thought long and hard about one song in particular that Ringo sang -- one of the Beatles' most popular songs from their most popular album -- "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," released in 1967. **The song was called "With a little help from my friends."** Written primarily by Paul McCartney, the song is a call-and-response between Ringo and the other three Beatles (McCartney, John Lennon, and George Harrison). It begins with a question: "What would you do if I sang out of tune, would you stand up and walk out on me?" The rest of the song is a subtle exploration into the limits of friendship -- whether any one will suffice for a friend, or whether a friend must be someone in particular. While the song never answers its own question, it does conclude with a positive affirmation: "I get by with a little help from my friends. Gonna try with a little help from my friends. I get by with a little help from my friends." Not ONE friend. Several friends.
- 2. Let me belabor the point for a moment and ask the question: How do we REALLY know who our friends are?** Without a doubt, we hear a lot about "friends" these days in the world of politics, in international relations, in the corporate world, in Hollywood, even in the church. Whether we like it or not (and I do NOT like it), our world continues to divide itself into smaller and smaller special-interest groups. Groups that look at the world in black-and-white terms -- with everyone classified as either a "friend" or an "enemy," as being "for us" or "against us." As always, life is never really this simple. And friendship cannot be

contained neatly in tiny little categories.

In a straight-forward manner, Webster's defines a friend as "someone we know and are fond of," and that is a helpful starting point. But it is only a starting point. So let us ask the question again: HOW DO WE REALLY KNOW WHO OUR FRIENDS ARE? A great many people have tried to answer that question, in a serious way and in a humorous way.

Here are some of their best efforts to define friendship:

(a) In the fourth century before Christ, the great philosopher **Aristotle** wrote that the "perfect antidote for fifty enemies is one true friend."

(b) Three centuries ago, **Benjamin Franklin** wrote that there are only three truly faithful friends in the world: "An old dog, an old wife, and ready money."

(c) The modern comedian **Robin Williams** quipped that "friends are God's way of apologizing for our families."

(d) Sixty years ago, **C.S. Lewis** wrote: "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'"

(e) One hundred years ago, **Albert Einstein** wrote: "In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit."

(f) And, finally, **a former seminary professor of mine** said that "a good friend is a lot cheaper than therapy . . . and more effective."

3. Friendship. I believe we have a good idea about what friendship looks like, and we can all name the close friends in our lives. But what exactly does the Lord Jesus say about friendship? And what type of friendship does He require of us? To answer those questions, let us look at the most important Biblical story about friendship -- a parable told by the Lord Jesus in our Gospel lesson today (Luke 10:25-37) about an anonymous man known only as the "Good Samaritan." A few contextual details about this parable:

(1) The setting. Jesus and His apostles are on their way to Jerusalem from the northern part of Israel -- and along the way our Lord continues His ministry of teaching and healing. In our lesson for today, Jesus is asked a question by a lawyer (who was trying to trap Jesus into saying something blasphemous). "Teacher," he said. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

(2) The response. Jesus replied: "You know the law. What does it say?" In other words, Jesus said, "You tell me the answer to your question." The lawyer says that we are supposed to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus agrees: "You have answered correctly. Do exactly this and you will live."

(3) The challenge. But the lawyer is not satisfied. He pushes further, asking Jesus to define the term "neighbor." "And just who IS my neighbor?" he asks. Remarkably, the Greek word used here is **pleision** -- which also means FRIEND, or ONE WHO IS NEAR. The lawyer is asking Jesus to define friendship, in other words.

(4) The parable. To answer the question about "friendship," Jesus tells a shocking story about an anonymous man who foolishly decided to walk alone

from Jerusalem down to Jericho -- a dangerous path (then and now) that descends over a winding, 17-mile stretch of wilderness from 2400 feet above sea level (Jerusalem) to 1200 feet below sea level (Jericho) . . . the lowest point on the face of the earth. Robbers accost the man, steal his things, beat him up, and leave him for dead. A priest and then a Levite (both of whom were walking separately DOWN the path) walk past the injured man, stepping to the other side of the road. (Both had good professional and liturgical reasons for wanting to avoid becoming ritually impure by contacting the injured man.) And then a third traveler shows up. A hated Samaritan stops and tends to the dying man . . . even taking him to a nearby village and paying money for the man to be cared for.

(5) The conclusion. Jesus asks, "Which of these three men was a neighbor (or friend) to the injured man?" The lawyer answered: "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said: "Go and do likewise."

4. This was a scandalous story when Jesus told it. Samaritans were considered half-breeds by orthodox Jews. They were ethnically different, nationally different, racially different, liturgically different, ethically different. To an orthodox Jew, back then, Samaritans were to be avoided. **But in this story the Samaritan is a hero. And WHY is he a hero? Because he showed mercy.**

The "proper religious people" -- symbolized by the priest and the Levite -- could not and would not be bothered by the injured man. But the Samaritan stopped. The MERCY shown by the Good Samaritan consisted of SIX things that he did:

- (1) He saw the need (as did the priest and Levite).
- (2) He took pity in his heart (which the other two did NOT do).
- (3) He drew near (even as the other two turned away).
- (4) He provided care (pouring on oil and wine, applying bandages).
- (5) He persisted in his care (taking him to a place of rest and healing).
- (6) He stayed engaged with the man (paying money and offering more).

And all six of these things resulted from a spur-of-the-moment decision. In the blink of an eye, the priest and the Levite turned away. In the blink of an eye, the Samaritan drew near . . . and saved a life that was about to perish.

5. And that leads me to the main point I want to make today:

It takes less than a second to decide to turn away from a needy person, or to get involved. The blink of an eye. Yet if we strive to see the world through the Lord's eyes, we suddenly realize that we belong to each other -- all of us -- through the bonds of friendship forged for us by God. We are friends, one to another. Friends in Christ Jesus. And we are commanded to care for one another, and especially for those who are hurting.

6. We make spur-of-the-moment decisions all the time -- every day, almost every moment. We encounter people all the time, maybe even here this morning, who need a friend . . . someone to show mercy . . . someone to make contact with them in a caring, merciful way. As we leave this morning, let us pay particular attention to the instant decisions we make all the time to either turn AWAY from those who need a friend . . . or to turn TOWARD them.