

"THE MAGNIFICENT POSSIBILITY THAT IS OURS"

INTRODUCTION

In Edward Albee's play, "A Delicate Balance", Harry and Edna come to experience a nameless terror in their lives. Afraid to stay in their own house, they first visit and then decide to move in and live with their friends Agnes and Tobias. Although the two couples have considered themselves the very best of friends for forty years, this move puts an unbearable strain on them. Almost overnight their illusions about themselves crumble in a sudden spasm of self-awareness, and Harry and Edna decide to go back home. As they are about to leave, Edna says to Agnes:

"We shouldn't have come.....for our own sake; our own lack. It's sad to know you've gone through it all.....or most of it, without....that the onè body you've wrapped your arms around.....the only skin you've ever known....is your own - and that it's dry....and not warm."

Now those are haunting - frightening words. They help to identify this nameless terror. Call it, if you will - utter loneliness. It's that terrifying feeling of being out off...alone...separated from others...bottled up inside yourself where it's all emptiness, echoes, darkness. It is the loneliness of being surrounded by people who touch your life at the surface, but not at the center. It is the realization that those you called "friends" are really just "acquaintances", that all of your relationships are thin and fragile, that all the time that you've lived, worked, laughed with people, you've really been hiding from them and they from you - until, at last - "you've gone through it all, or most of it...that the only skin you've ever known is your own - and that it's dry and not warm".

JONATHAN AND DAVID

Perhaps this is why the story of the friendship of David and Jonathan moves me so, as I suspect it touches you. This beautiful Old Testament relationship suggests a cure for that nameless terror that can threaten us. Now - in the Hebrew language there is no word for friend, but in Jonathan's relationship with David - whatever is meant by that word is given flesh and blood and breath. It is summed up so beautifully in those few verses that we read earlier in the service:

".....the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul....then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul; and Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his girdle. And David went out and was successful...."

In friendship like this is the deliverance from that nameless terror, from the hell of going through it all and having the only skin you've ever known - be your own..." Suppose we examine in the next several minutes two components of great friendship.

FRIENDSHIP: A COVENANT

"Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as he loved his own soul". A covenant is a bond - it is a brotherhood established between two people who are not blood brothers. It is interesting to note, for our purposes, that Jonathan and David were of different backgrounds. Jonathan - the son of a King; David - the son of a shepherd. This difference - and all that it meant - might have kept them apart, even set them against each other. However, in spite of their differences, they became deep friends. "Jonathan made a covenant with David". Such a covenant is not a matter, mind you, of natural affection alone. It is not a matter of feeling attracted to some one, so that if the attraction cools the bond is broken. A covenant is a matter of making a choice - of freely deciding to enter into a relationship which may not come naturally or easily, nor be quickly broken or ended.

In a sense the covenant is always sealed with a sacrifice. The sacrifice that seals the covenant of friendship is the giving of one's self to the other, of laying one's self open to the other, of making one's self vulnerable to the other, of putting one's self along with all of one's hopes - dreams - secrets - fears - into the hands of the other. C. S. Lewis put it in memorable words when he said:

"Eros - (that is erotic love) - will have naked bodies; friendship naked personalities. It is an affair of stripped minds..."

Even so - it is that offering of your naked personality to another that is the sacrifice that seals the covenant of great friendship. And as with any sacrifice, it is difficult and perhaps we pull back from it - afraid to take the risk of ridicule or rection or misunderstanding. But the option is to have "the only skin you've ever known....your own....dray and not warm".

Recall that beautiful book "The Chosen" by Chaim Potok and how it begins when Danny Saunders hurts Reuven Malter in a baseball game. It seemed almost deliberate and when Danny comes to visit Reuven in the hospital, he confesses that at that moment in the game, he hated Reuven and wanted to hurt him. Reuven is angry and tells Danny to leave, but the next day Danny comes back and begins telling Reuven other things about himself, secrets that reveal a great deal about his life. When Reuven tells his father - who is a Rabbi - about Danny's visits, his father says: "Reuven listen to me. The Talmud says that a person should do two things for himself. One is to acquire a teacher. Do you remember what the other is?" Reuven answers, "yes...choose a friend". His father continued. "Yes....you know what a friend is Reuven? A Greek philospher said that two people who are true friends are like two bodies with one soul....Reuven, if you can make Danny Saunders your friend." "I like him a lot" responded Reuven. "No...listen to me" his father replys. "I am not talking about liking him. I am telling you to make him your friend and to let him make you his friend." A little later the father explains why to Reuven: "Danny Saunders is a terribly torn and lonely boy. There is literally no one in the world he can talk to....he would never have told you what he did, if he believed for a moment you would not keep his words a secret trust". So Danny and Reuven chose each other as friends.

"Jonathan made a covenant with David". The covenant of friendship is based on free choice and a sacrifice - the offering of your naked personality, your stripped mind to another. Friendship is pre-eminently such a covenant, making brothers of those who might otherwise have been only acquaintances or even enemies.

FRIENDSHIP: A SHARING

The second component of great friendship is the sharing of the battles and the burdens of the other. When Jonathan gave his robe and armor and sword and bow to David, it meant that henceforth he was one with David in all of his struggles - not only his struggles against his enemies that threatened him from without, but also his struggles against his enemies that threatened him from within - within his own soul. Those enemies within are sometimes more difficult to wage battle against....those battles that take place behind the closed doors of a persons' life. It is so much easier to help another in his battle with poverty or unemployment or schooling than it is to accept and help him in his battles with fear or anger or frustration or lust or bitterness or inferiority.. So often in order to help another with the inner enemies means acknowledging that we too have those same inner enemies in our lives.

Going back for a moment to "A Delicate Balance" - Tobias is trying to decide how to cope with his suddenly acquired "best friend" tenants - Harry and Edna. Tobias' wife, Agnes, tells him that Harry and Edna have brought some disease, some illness with them into their home. In anguish Tobias asks: "What am I supposed to do?"

Say to them....'look...you can't stay here you two...you've got trouble....you're our friends and all that, but when you come in here you've got to be clean!' Agnes, if that's all that Harry and Edna mean to us, then....what about ourselves? When we talk to each other....what have we meant? Anything? When we touch, when we promise, and say...yes, or please...have we meant yes, but only if....if there's a condition attached to it, Agnes....then it's all been empty...."

OUR FRIENDSHIP

In other words, ~~to be a true friend, and to share another's burdens and his battles...~~ if there are conditions attached to it...if people have to come to us "clean" or "perfect" in order to find acceptance then there is an emptiness or shallowness and hollowness to it all. To share another's burdens and battles - to be a friend - is to shed the pose of superiority with a glad confession of similarity. It is to say, "Look...you don't have to come to me with a perfect record - not because I overlook your faults and weaknesses - but because there are blots and blemishes and smudges on my own". Let us fight the battle and carry the burden together. I think to do otherwise is to "go through it all with the one body you've wrapped your arms around....the only skin you'll ever know being your own....dry and not warm".

TRANSITION And so I suggest that friendship suggests a cure for the terror, the hell of loneliness. But the point of this sermon is not to exhort you to become friends, or even to tell you how to be, but rather to tell you that we may be - in the best sense - friends to others. It is not a demand, but rather a possibility - a magnificent possibility that is ours. Let me offer two conclusions here at this point for your consideration:

CHURCH: COMMUNITY OF FRIENDS The first is that the church - whenever it is the church - is a community of friends. And if we are not friends, then we are not the church - whatever else we may think or say we are. In the book, "To Believe in God" there is this definition: "To believe in God is to drink wine, it is to eat bread not by yourself, but by some other magic". That "some other magic" by which we eat bread and drink wine and sing and pray and labor and learn and live - not by ourselves but together in this community called a church - that "some other magic" is the grace, the mercy, the spirit of God. It is by a mysterious process not altogether of our own doing that we are brought together in this place.

Remember earlier when I told you of that episode from the book, "The Chosen", where Reuven Malter's father asks him to choose Danny Saunders for his friend, because as events had shown, Danny had chosen Reuven for his friend and entrusted himself to him? Well, Reuven reflects: "It all started with a ordinary game of baseball. I can't believe it". His father replies: "Reuven, as you grow older you will discover that the most important things that will happen to you will often come as a result of ordinary things. That's the way the world is".

I believe that this is the way the world is, the way the world so often operates - "That the most important things that happen to us will often come as a result of ordinary things". It may be that as we come to this place of worship and fellowship...and sit beside each other....and share in some labor of love in this place...ordinary thought it may seem to us - in it may be the spirit of God at work. I think of what this church has meant to me - this community of friends - to my family - to so many who have passed through its doors in the years that I have been its pastor. I think of the words that have come back to us from friends of former days....it was the church, that group of people that made all the difference in my life while I was in New York....it was the church, that group of good people who helped me....sustained me....shared warmth and love with me while I was passing around

a difficult corner. As one friend from a former day use to say - it was the oasis in the desert of Manhattan. It was the church - that community of friends - that made the difference. The warmth of that group of friends helped me overcome the hell of loneliness. I should like to believe that "some other magic" to be God at work!

A FRIEND TO THE WORLD

And the second conclusion is that the church is chosen to be a friend to the world. Friendship is something that either grows, expands, enlarges or it stagnates and eventually dies. It can't be hugged or hoarded. That same "other magic" that unites us here on Sundays in worship and fellowship also prompts us to reach out in ever-widening circles to the world around us, to this community where we find some strange mixtures and contrasts - affluence and poverty - people, some well-off and satisfied, others poor and restless - some black and bitter, some white and frightened - some well-educated, others ill educated. Maybe it is not altogether an accident that we are here - in this place and time with such magnificent possibilities for friendships on every hand.

I would remind you, as we begin another year together - what can happen to a person can also happen to a church. We can go through it all and have the one body that we wrap our arms around....the only skin we ever know to be our own...and it will be dry and not warm. That happens when we come here only for what we can get and not for what we can give....wanting only to be befriended...to find a wife or a husband...or a play-mate - not to be a friend to others. So a church, too, can get lonely - cut-off, bottled up inside unless it chooses, as I believe we are called, to confirm that we have been chosen to be a friend to this community, to be to it as Jonathan was to David - to sacrifice ourselves for it, to be open to it, to have kindred personalities with it, to help carry its burdens and fight its battles.

On Homecoming Sunday one sets the direction, points the way for the year ahead. I would urge you to continue and to strengthen the way we are moving...to be a friend to the world....to this community - to the lonely young adult, to the lonely and bewildered divorced person, to the lonely retired man or woman, to be a friend to the sick, the poor, the rich, the bitter, the discouraged. What a marvellous opportunity is ours. Let us not miss it or muff it. In order to meet this opportunity, we need a re-commitment - a re-dedication of each of you to this task. We need you to commit your time, your talent, your energy, and yes - your financial resources - to help us meet this opportunity. To this ministry of friendship and service in Christ's name, we ask you to dedicate yourself quietly at the end of this service, remembering that the power behind us is always far greater than the tasks before us.

SHALL WE PRAY

O Spirit of the Living God, who hast filled this place in times past, fill it now again that the people who are drawn here may be strengthened and renewed to do thy will, enabled to surpass themselves, and to share and show that love to others which we find revealed in the life and teachings of the man from Nazareth, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen