

FRIENDS FOR THE JOURNEY

(Second in the Series: Hiker's Guide to the Spiritual Life)

Texts: II Tim. 4:9-18; Eccl. 4:7-12

10/18/09

Introduction

I was in McDonald's early on Saturday morning, a few minutes after 7, waiting for my coffee. I saw three guys in early morning weekend wardrobe sitting at a table on the other side of the restaurant. They had their coffee and their newspapers spread out in front of them. And they were doing something unusual (other than being up). One was talking, and the other two were listening, intently.

I don't know for certain, but given their body language and my own personal history I'm ninety percent sure that I was watching the "spiritual" buddy system in action. Three guys, up early on a Saturday checking in with each other. Each one probably answering some version of the question: *And how is it with your soul?*

Last week we said when you want to hike faithfully through this world, you'll need the light of God's word for your path. But one of the first rules every cub scout and Boy Scout is taught is that when it comes to hiking outside of camp, you never hike alone. And that applies if we hope to hike faithfully through this life in pursuit of Jesus Christ.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, after his long, sober examination of the world says as much:

Two are better than one...If one falls down his friend can help him up...Though one may be overpowered two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. (4:10-12)

As we talk today about what to take with us on the spiritual journey, we need to be sure we pack a strong rope - a braided cord of connection with another human being or two. A person that we give permission to ask us the truth about the health of our soul. And a person to whom we tell the truth when they ask.

- 1. I think that most of us think of the Bible as book of rules and doctrine – revealed truths about God and how we should live in the light of that truth. It is. But our tendency causes us to miss something equally important. It is a story of what human beings need if they hope to flourish.**

The Apostle Paul for all his brilliance, determination, theological insight, and scriptural was at the end of the day, human. And here we see him at the end of his days. As he sits in his Roman jail cell it appears he is coming to the end of his race. It is quite possible that the next trial will end with his execution. So he writes to his friend and co-laborer Timothy and says, Do your best to come to me quickly.

Come to me quickly...the others have left and only Luke remains. And bring Mark as well. I feel my solitude.

Come to me quickly...and bring the cloak I left at Troas. Winter is coming and it's cold in this place.

Come to quickly...and bring my scrolls, especially the parchments. Could it have been he collected sayings of Jesus which he needed for his own comfort? Could they have been the letters he needed to finish so that when the end came he had done all he could do?

We see here a human being who needs another with whom he has shared a deep relationship of joy and struggle, success and failure. And he needs it because that is how God made him, and every one of us.

Scripture teaches that we were made for each other. To be rightly related to God is to become rightly, and deeply, related to others. Biblical faith is rarely a solo act or a stadium rally. Adam had his Eve. Moses had Aaron. David loved Jonathan as himself. Jesus lived and died among his twelve. Paul traveled and prayed with Barnabus.

We need the community of hundreds gathered in a sanctuary. We benefit from learning with ten or twenty in a classroom. But we just as urgently need two or three who share our journey when we are away from this place. I have sat in hundreds of church services and classroom lectures and remember very few of them. I have sat with two or three where we told our joys and struggles and listened for the Word of God through each other. I can see some twenty year old conversations as if they happened yesterday.

A cord of three stands is not easily broken.

2. So we need a spiritual buddy system for this hike. It sounds simple enough. But if it was that simple, more of us would be doing it.

The writer of Ecclesiastes makes his beautiful statement about the strength of a three stranded cord because he sees how few people have one:

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?"

He's saying life's toil can be seductive. What we think we need can deprive us from what we really need. The material compensation of our work cannot make up for spiritual poverty of having nobody to share it with.

One of the costs of living in the 24/7 world most of us do is relationships of depth. Good relationships take time, and time is the one thing we always find ourselves saying we don't have enough of.

And then there is the deep seated belief that we are perfectly competent to hike alone. If by original creation we were made for relationship with God and each other, it is the effect of original sin to make us believe we'll be fine all by ourselves.

Who wants to weak enough to admit he or she needs help to make it? Who wants to vulnerable enough to confess our sins or fears to somebody else? What will people think? Better to stand spiritually independent – and alone – than spiritually dependant – and what? Connected and fulfilled, perhaps?

There's deep temptation in the human heart to hide from each other. Spiritual growth requires the courage to trust someone enough to tell the truth about yourself.

3. We know what we are afraid of. What is a spiritual companion going to do for me? What is trusting someone enough to tell them how it is with my soul likely to accomplish?

For one, we're much more likely to grow spiritually if quit trying to go it alone. In the book of Galatians Paul writes:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal. 6:22-23)

In other words the best measure of spiritual growth is how I'm doing with you, not how I'm doing with me! It's not hard to think we're patient when we avoid having relationships that might require it. Christianity is a way of life, not just a set of doctrines.

Christian Smith has just written a book called *Souls in Transition: The Religion and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. He's trying to figure out what 18 – 29 year olds seek and need in order to grow in the life of faith. What does this very independent, anti-institutional, and very anxious generation need in order to put down roots in the Christian faith?

His answer is “you”. What 18- 29 year olds need is 39 – 62 year olds who will get to know them in an authentic personal way and say, “Here's what I've learned in life.” He writes:

...in terms of the implications of our work for churches, the two key words are engagement and relationships. It can't just be programs or classes or handing them over to the youth pastor. Real change happens in relationship...

And none of us ever outgrows the need for a friend for the journey. Who among us becomes so perfect that we don't need someone to offer us compassion and guidance in our sins and struggles? Who among us is so wise that we no longer need counsel about how to love our spouses, raise our children, do our jobs, or spend our money? And who among us is so full that we no longer need to hear the story about the grace, wonder, and goodness of Jesus Christ in another's life?

Jesus' classroom for the shaping of twelve souls was the life he shared with them. We should not expect to find a better one.

4. We need deep friends for the spiritual journey because that's how we're made and that's how we grow. And we need them because that's how we're likely to encounter Jesus along the path.

Maybe the writer of Ecclesiastes hinted at more than he knew when said, “*A cord of three stands is not easily broken.*”

Maybe that was somewhere in the back of Jesus' mind when he said, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.*” (Matt. 18:20)

I can't settle for a Jesus that only lives between the pages of a book. I still need him to walk the earth and meet me along the way. And he still does when we meet with one another in his name.

Just as he dwells among the bread and wine we eat and drink in faith, don't you think he visits in the midst of lives shared in faith? I don't think I want to call honest, vulnerable, Christian conversation a sacrament, but it may not be far from it.

So who are your two or three? Companions who will neither hide behind chatter nor disappear in silence. Those who will listen long to your story and humbly seek to speak God's Word. Maybe when you gather in sacred assembly at the McDonald's or the office where you work, or sitting on the carpet in your living room, you might see Jesus in the flesh sitting across from you.

Conclusion

Sometimes we make the spiritual life far too difficult. As if only those with unlimited time and monk-like personalities could ever experience God as anything but a rumor.

Ann Lamont wrote these words in her book *Traveling Mercies*:

...I always imagined as a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up, I found that life handed you these rusty, bent, old tools – friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty – and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly, against all odds, they're enough.

I'm offering you an old tool. Who knows how it is with your soul? If we lack such friends it's time to seek them.