

“WHEN FRIENDSHIP LIFTS US UP”

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Our Exodus story is at once peculiar, touching, and comical. Moses has quickly gone from master prophet miraculously plotting an escape from a cruel oppressor against impossible odds to just some jerk taking them into the wilds to kill them of hunger and thirst. Even worse, the Israelites face raiding bedouins, attacking and killing them. Israel cannot reach Mt. Sinai and fulfill their destiny because the Amalekites draw a line in the sand, “Not through our land, you don’t.”

A fight follows. Moses and wandering Israel wins. What makes this victory? Not high-tech arms. Not tactics or regimentation. Not even clever strategy. No, Israel wins because of a superior grasp of relationships. Yes, *relationships*. I am telling you, it is Dr. Phil versus Osama bin Laden. Let me explain. As the battle was drawn, an unconventional battle plan emerged. Joshua went with the army of Israel into the valley to begin its advance against Amalek. Meanwhile, Moses ascended a hilltop with his lieutenants, Aaron, Hur and others. From that vantage point, where they watched the clash unfold, Moses held aloft the staff he used to strike and part the Red Sea.

From there, the battle had its ups and downs. First one army prevailed, then the other. But notice Exodus’ report that whenever Moses held his hands with the staff upward, the armies of Israel advanced against Amalek. But when Moses dropped his arms, the battle turned against the Israelites. Curious, isn’t it? So if you find yourself writhing and twisting this evening to help Eli in the pocket or Tom with his quarterback sneak, don’t feel so silly. Body english has biblical roots.

No, I kid, something greater, we can all relate to, is happening here. This next bit stirs the heart. As Moses held up the staff, we read his hands grew weary. I bet much more than Moses’ hands got drained by that balky, crabby horde. Think of holding you own hands up, like working above your head, as in painting a ceiling. This rotator cuff graduate isn’t lasting very long like that. So as Moses’ arms sagged, his friends lurched forward to help him. First, they gave him a stone to sit on. Then Aaron and Hur held up his hands, on one side and the other. They steadied Moses’ hands till sunset. They held up Moses’ arms all day long as his strength faltered until the enemy was subdued. Strange circumstances, unusual strategies, and a timeless message: as we surround ourselves with uncommon friends, we are graced in a way impossible alone by ourselves.

The obvious sermon to preach on this text is to declare that as your leader, engaging battles we cannot yet foresee, I cannot be adequate unless you are at my sides to help hold up my arms. It’s true enough, and I am glad I said it. But I want to make a broader interpretation, more in line with our series on spiritual passion, more about us all finding our way forward instead of just me.

Can you imagine a better image to describe friendship? Our friends hold up the arms with which we engage life as they grow weary. Can you imagine anything more sustaining than friends to stoke your passion to bear up in doing what you must do? I for one cannot. So much of the spiritual work we do is like the difficult and demanding work done with our arms over our heads. It is exhausting toil becoming a good husband or wife, good mother or father, employee or neighbor.

Theology treats many vital areas, sanctification and justification, soteriology and pneumatology and Christology. In my opinion, the biggest deficit in the lengthy annals and massive tomes of Christian theology across two millennia is: why haven’t we focused more on friendship? It’s vital.

We have enough scriptural warrant in front of us today in our Exodus story, don't we? Why, if this OT tale were a song, Bill Withers would have written it and we would all have it memorized. "We all need somebody, (to lean on)." I'll do that now and again to make sure I haven't lost you.

Gordon MacDonald writes, "Special friends are part of the economy of spiritual passion, and in most cases, an indispensable part. Unlike the very draining and very nice people of our worlds, special friends are committed to helping one another discover and maintain spiritual passion. Each member of a team of special friends rejoices when another succeeds. Each weeps when another falls. Special friendships do not envy when someone wins; nor do they gloat at failure."

John's gospel features a moment of Jesus loftily teaching about our human destiny for joy, how to live and act out divine love. But then Jesus backs off. He wants to be more than shepherd to sheep, more than rescuer to the lost, more than master to servants. Jesus wants to be their *friend*. And he wants his followers to be his friends also. "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant doesn't 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." (John 15.15) Maybe he is saying, if we do friends well enough, maybe that will also fulfill the fancy, lofty stuff.

Sometimes it has worked out that I have close friends in the church; sometimes it has not. Time will tell. Lillian Daniel, senior pastor of First Congregational, Glen Ellyn, Illinois writes tellingly about this. She is my friend in a team of special pastor friends who have gathered for decades.

Lillian tells of her mother's death. A quartet of church members flew down to sing at her funeral in Washington DC. As the senior deacon spoke at the service, he explained that he represented her home church. Lillian remarks how powerful that was for her. For she had felt a need to keep distance from them in the intimacies of her ministry. But here they were proclaiming the gospel to her in song at the saddest moment of her life. What greater intimacy is there? she wondered.

After the funeral, she looked around her mother's house, full of folks gathered for the reception. A table full of canapés had replaced the hospital bed in the living room, where she had died six days before. The smell of her stepfather's Greek food had mixed with the sick scent of a week-long coma. Lillian's ability to make small talk was wearing thin. At that point, she writes, I needed my collegial friendships—not the neighbors or even the family, but the Christian ministers who had accompanied me in the walk of loss along the way, who understood what it meant to visit the sick of your church while your mother was dying somewhere else. Just then, a minister friend from New Haven showed up for Lillian. He heard of her loss and quietly booked a flight. Seeing him standing there among the mourners, amidst the small talk, gave her the witness that she still had a life waiting for her at home, that her mother's death would not have the last word.

The quartet from her home church who sang at the service approached Lillian to say goodbye. "We're heading back to the airport. We're not staying for the reception. If we do, you will worry about us. You will feel like you have to introduce us to all of these people." They were right, of course. She would fuss over them. But they had underestimated the power of their presence.

She didn't know how to say it, but they saw it in her face. So the four decided to remain for her. "OK, we'll stay for the reception," they said. "But only if you promise not to act like the minister. Because now you should just be the grieving daughter." Their intuitive understanding of the moment helped Lillian grasp that their boundaries could be more permeable than she had realized. "Please stay," she replied. "I promise to ignore you." It was the first time she laughed all day. Her friends held up her arms, without calling attention to themselves, when she needed it most.

When I was two months into my divorce, Valentine's Day fell on a Sunday. Lillian had that Sunday off. Rather than go to a spa for the weekend, Lillian planted herself in a front pew of my church with her daughter. She smiled smiles of encouragement at me when I wasn't seeing so many smiles. Then Lillian, Abigail, and I had a Valentine's date, brunch at the Three Bears Inn. I hadn't realized how much my arms were faltering in those days till Lillian lifted them up for me.

I like how Mark Twain defined a true friend as the person who laughs with you when your jokes aren't so funny and cries with you when your troubles aren't so bad. So much of friendship boils down to simple companionship, doesn't it? Standing by one another and lifting each other up in the trials and tribulations of the course of a usual day, defeating those Amalekites on your block.

Maybe it's a good thing that we talk about companionship on a communion Sunday. After all, do you know the origins of that word? It is from Latin. "Pan" means bread, of course. "Com" means with in Latin. So a friend or companion is the one you break bread or have brunch with. So it is we approach this table together today for the first time. Will you break bread with me, friends? Amen.