

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

The Wisdom of Friendship

(Selected verses from Proverbs)

Introduction: Radishes vs. asparagus...

Here at the front end of our time together, I'm going to take a minute to brag about my vegetable garden.

South Texas gardening is a challenge. It's often too hot. There's rarely enough rain. The soil is lousy. But I like the challenge, getting my hands dirty, and watching things grow.

I usually plant tomatoes, peppers, beans, different kinds of greens, and broccoli. But I have never planted radishes.

I don't much like radishes. My cardinal law of gardening is that I only plants vegetables either Kathy or I like to eat.¹

It could be satisfying to plant radishes, though. I have read that you can harvest as soon as five weeks after planting the seeds. But then, you're harvesting radishes. So, it's not much of a win.

On the other hand, there is asparagus. Kathy and I both love asparagus. It's delicious and nutritious - and expensive. It would be a great cash crop.

I've tried to grow asparagus a few times over the years, but those were all failures. I never harvested any asparagus.

That's because growing asparagus takes a bit of work and a lot of time. In years past, I wasn't willing to put in the time or the work to get a harvest of asparagus.

Well, about four years ago, I prepared a new garden bed in the backyard and into that bed I planted some asparagus crowns.

I followed instructions and didn't harvest any asparagus for the first two years of their growth. I simply weeded and watered and fertilized.

Then, last year (year 3), we enjoyed a few meals with fresh asparagus. This year, we had a few more meals of asparagus. I can't wait for next year as each year more plants will be harvest ready.

The lesson of the radish and the asparagus is that a plant that requires little yields little; a plant that requires much yields much.

The tie-in to today's time in Scripture is that we're exploring what the book of Proverbs has to say about friendship.

In Proverbs, wise King Solomon wrote as if to say that you and I can plant "radish friendships" if we want. Those friendships require little of us and they quickly bring a small, pretty unsatisfying harvest.

Or we can commit to the more labor-and-time-intensive, but infinitely more rewarding cash crop of "asparagus friendships." These will take time and energy to develop, but, in the end, they'll bring a rich, delicious, and nutritious relational harvest.

Proverbially speaking...

King Solomon wrote Proverbs to give us practical advice that will lead to a God-honoring life.² He wants us to know that the key to that kind of a life is *wisdom*. And when Solomon used the word "wisdom" he wasn't thinking about philosophy, but something very down to earth.

¹ One year, I mistakenly planted cauliflower. Fortunately, it didn't produce. 😊

² Some later parts of the book were written by others. Agur the son of Jakeh contributed Proverbs 30:1-33. King Lemuel wrote Proverbs 31.

Biblically speaking, wisdom is *skill*³ linked to *common sense* under the umbrella of *the fear of God*.⁴

This morning, I'm giving a stand-alone, one-off message about friendship from Proverbs before we dive into Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth next Sunday.

And I decided to speak to this theme because, for all of us, the quality and the depth of our friendships are critically important.⁵

We need friendships -and of a certain quality that Solomon describes - especially as we look to take next steps with Jesus.

A word about friendship...

There are, as you know, forces at work today that work against building great friendships.⁶

- High-tech is wonderful. But high-tech gadgets can keep us from high-touch relating.
- We keep busy schedules. We have full lives. OK. That busy-ness can become a wall that says, *"I'm busy. Don't bother me."*
- People move in and out of our relational circles all the time. The pain of those losses can tempt us to resist getting close to people out of fear of the eventual loss of yet another friend.

³ In Job 39:17, the ostrich's inability to rear her young is seen as a lack of *wisdom*. In Jeremiah 4:22, the prophet rebukes the Jews for their sin. But in so doing, he says that they have *"skill (literally wisdom) in doing evil."*

⁴ The fear of God recognizes that God is our majestic judge and our Lord.

⁵ It is possible to study Proverbs verse by verse, which is how we'll tackle 1 Corinthians, starting next week. But Solomon's book is mostly thematic and one of the major themes coursing through Proverbs is that of close relationships. Among Solomon's other important themes in Proverbs: the transcendent value of worship, the need for diligence in work, the need for sexual and emotional self-control, the beauty of sex in marriage, guidance about how to handle finances, how to deal with authority, and the need for compassion.

⁶ The most common Hebrew word for "friend" can also be translated "neighbor." While at times the word signifies only "the other person" in conversation (who may be a virtual stranger), much of the time it signifies a person with whom we have the closest fellowship. This is, in fact, the normal sense when we read of the friend in the book of Proverbs.

For all kinds of reasons, we may be tempted to avoid deep friendships. But we hunger and thirst for them. We need friendships.

Solomon knew all of this, firsthand, and he wants us to move into the world of friendship armed with wisdom.

Our first look at friendship from Proverbs finds Solomon issuing some friendly warnings.

About some things, it is true that if it waddles like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is probably a duck. But not everything that looks like a friend is a friend.

For instance, we should be aware that some friends are simply the best friends money can buy.

Friendship's Red Flag Warnings!

Beware the Counterfeit Friend

The best "friends" money can buy

[19:4] Wealth adds many friends

But a poor person is separated from his friend. (also 19:6)

Solomon's warning here tells us that if you have something to give (money, popularity, time, or power), you need to watch out.

People will flock to you. But these friends who surround you may be out to fleece you.

We can be sure that as a king, Solomon knew of this dynamic, first-hand. A king's entourage will consist of some friends AND some people who hang around just because of the king's fame and fortune.

Powerful people in our own world experience the same thing.

If you're a rock star, a politician on the rise, or a star athlete, you'll be flocked by friends.⁷

But if you lose an election, lose a step on the field, or lose your financial wherewithal, your "friends" may desert you.

There are others who masquerade as friends and they want you to think that they are friends, but they are not really friends.

Here's a verse we'll see a couple of times this morning. This time we're keying in on the second line.

"Friends" with an agenda

***[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.***

Someone greets you with the greeting customary to a friend. A kiss. An embrace. A firm handshake.

But this friend's kiss is insincere. He's faking it.⁸

Here's how the world is supposed to work: God gave us things to use and people to treasure. Sadly, it is not uncommon to see people being used and things treasured. That's backwards from God's design.

If we're wise, we'll keep our eye out for fake friends and have nothing to do with them.

Most people with a little grey have had sad experiences with a counterfeit friend. Many who aren't yet grey have learned that all that glitters, friend-wise, isn't gold.

So, a bunch of us don't need Solomon's grave warnings.

But if you are young, or if you haven't yet found yourself in the crosshairs of someone who has wanted to use you and uses the guise of being a friend to get what they want, listen carefully.

Beware. Be on the lookout for people who would take advantage of you. Run from them like the plague. Solomon would say that to do anything else is simply foolish.

In the first line of this proverb, we find another friendship warning.

Friend vs. Acquaintance

***[18:24] A person of too many friends comes to ruin,
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.***

This man or this woman has a ton of friends. Their friends cover mile after square mile. But these friendships all run about an inch deep.

There is no danger of drowning in these friendships. Nor is it likely that these friendships will bring refreshment or help or encouragement.

Solomon says that those who surround themselves only with inch-deep friends ***"come to ruin."*** We need more than surfacy friends.⁹

With many, many friends, it can be easy to hold people at arm's length. Don't let anyone into our confidence. Run from relational intimacy. Keep the wall up and intact.

And it is easier (in the short run) to establish acquaintance-level relationships with several dozen people rather than forge a few, meatier friendships.

But surfacy won't work for long and it definitely doesn't work when the chips are down, when life caves in, when hard times come.

⁷ One of rock music's early stars, Janis Joplin, uttered a comment that has been quoted through the years. After a concert only months before her suicide she said, *"I have just made love to 25,000 people, and I am going home alone."*

⁸ Remember the kiss of betrayal from Judas to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

⁹ One wise man commented, *"One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible."*

We need deeper than surface level friendships.

Yes, the world of friendship is fraught with danger. In fact, according to Solomon, the only thing more dangerous than friendship is not having friends.

A Word to the “Lone Ranger”

***[18:1] The one who separates himself seeks his own desire,
He quarrels against all sound wisdom.***

This is the “Lone Ranger,” and that’s iconic Americana. The Lone Ranger speaks of rugged individualism. *“I’ve got this. No problem. No help needed.”*

We admire responsibility and independence. And the Lord does expect us to take care of our own obligations.

But IF we separate ourselves from close friendships and live as personal islands with no deep connections, we’re swimming in dangerous waters.

So, there are imposters posing as friends we need to avoid. There are “friends” who can be bought, “friends” who would take advantage, and “friendships” that only touch the surface.

None of this is what we want or what we need.

Still, we need friends. Not the counterfeit, but the real thing.¹⁰ Which is why, for the remainder of our time this morning, we are going to focus on Solomon’s descriptions of a true friend.

The first thing we’ll note is that a true friend is not a fair-weather friend.

We’ve all heard the saying, *“He’s a good man in a storm.”* A true friend is a friend when life’s storms hit. He, she is a foul-weather friend.

True Friends...

...Give the Gift of PRESENCE

***[17:17] A friend loves at all times,
And a brother is born for adversity.***

and (one we just saw)

***[18:24] A man of many friends comes to ruin,
But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.***¹¹

Both of these proverbs affirm what we all know: When times are tough, we need a Velcro friend.¹²

Brother-friends and sister-friends are the ones you want to visit you in the hospital, the ones you want to sit with you when tragedy strikes.

Velcro-friends are the ones who help you pick up the pieces of your life after a business failure or after a moral blowout.

When it seems like all the world is against you, the friend ***“who sticks closer than a brother”*** is right beside you. Pray for that friend. Look for that friend. Be that friend.

A second characteristic of the friendship for which we all hunger is honesty.

...Are (sometimes brutally) HONEST

[27:6] Faithful are the wounds of a friend,

¹¹ See also 14:20; 19:4,6,7.

¹² Solomon is of a mind that there is no better picture of a deep relationship than that which should exist between brothers. That is why David, Solomon’s father, referred to Jonathan, his closest friend, as his ***“brother”*** in 2 Samuel 1:26.

¹⁰ I’m told that US Treasury officials whose job is to identify counterfeit money are trained first to identify the real thing. When they know the real thing, they can spot the funny money every time.

But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.

Every day, at every hospital in San Antonio, skilled surgeons take knives and slice open the bodies of their patients. They spill blood - on purpose.

They know full well that the cuts they make will cause pain. But, to promote overall health, they hack away at their patient's bodies.

A true friend is willing to be a soul surgeon. You won't hear empty flattery from a friend. You will get unvarnished truth.

Your friend will tear into you. But his wounds are better than the insincere embrace of an enemy.

Friendship requires the courage to lance the boil of a friend's angry spirit with an honest, well-timed rebuke.

Your friend loves you so much that she's willing to cause pain and risk rejection by wielding a verbal scalpel and telling you the hard truth you'd rather not hear.

Over the years and recently, many people here have told me what I needed to hear rather than what I wanted to hear. I am forever in their debt.

Some have pulled me aside when I've spoken rashly and called me on it. Some have questioned my decisions. Others have challenged me to defend and to refine my theology.

I'm a better man for having had friends who were willing to speak the truth. We all need one or two or three or four friends like that. We all should aspire to be friends like that.

And Solomon says something else about friendship that is so critical we need to hear it.

...Provide Loving and Wise COUNSEL

***[27:9] Oil and perfume make the heart glad,
And a person's advice is sweet to his friend.***

Over not much more time than the last half-century or so, there has developed a whole branch of counseling that is solidly Christ-centered and scriptural. I praise God for that development.

We applaud the efforts of counsellors who work hard to wisely apply Scripture's truths to serious personal issues. I thank God for the many skilled counsellors I have known.

Here, Solomon speaks of the therapeutic effect of a friend in the life of his friend.

The counsel of a friend is like perfume in that it lingers long after the friend gives the counsel, the encouragement, or the rebuke.

And why does it linger? It's because the words of a friend are sourced in love. Our friends know us. They care for us.¹³

If you are going to be that kind of a friend, you will eventually take the risk to talk about things other than the weather and politics and sports.

You'll ask open-ended questions that may well open Pandora's Box. You'll probe. Pry. Snoop.

You'll approach your friend with questions that explore their soul. You'll ask questions that expose motives.

- *"I was so happy to hear about your promotion at work recently! I'm curious...How did that win impact your dependence on God?"*
- *"I was so sad to hear the news about your last check-up / the choice your child recently made / the loss of your job. How have you met God in your pain?"*
- *"How are you getting along with your friends? What's up with your marriage? How are you with your neighbors, the people at work, your schoolmates? In other words, how are your relationships?"*

¹³ There are many studies that validate the idea that so-called "lay counselors" and "peer counselors" often do a better, more credible job of counseling than the paid professionals.

If you would be a friend who lives out Proverbs 27:9, one whose counsel to your friend is like sweet perfume, you will probe your friend's soul and will point your friend to Jesus in life's storms.

Solomon says that in a genuine friendship there is:

- **PRESENCE** - support, especially in the tough times.
- **HONESTY** - truth-telling, no holds barred.
- **COUNSEL** - thoughtful input that leads to insight.

That's the kind of friendship God had in mind when He created friendship.

As we head for the homestretch, I want to highlight one out-of-this-world benefit to soul-to-soul friendship AND list a few of the costs involved in cultivating them.

The first cost of friendship may sound funny, maybe even odd.

Friendship's Costs - and a Benefit

Friendship's Price Tags

Friendship costs SPACE (25:17)

[25:17] Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's¹⁴ house, Or he will become weary of you and hate you.

At first blush it looks like Solomon is giving pointers on protocol. And sure, it is not a good idea to go over to your friend's house too frequently or to stay too long.

But the real point here is that friendship must be held with a loose hand.

The friend who demands, who requires, time and attention is treating friendship as an inalienable right. But that isn't what friendship is.

A friend is a gift from God and a treasure. Friendship is a precious and a fragile thing.

Friendships are ruined when one friend puts the other under pressure and obligation. Friends don't do that to friends.

Here's another cost we'll be willing to pay for friendship. Sensitivity. Situational awareness.

Friendship costs SENSITIVITY (27:14)

[27:14] He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning, It will be considered a curse to him.

So, you are a morning person. Your friend isn't. She shows up for work, but barely. Her body is there, but her mind, spirit, and soul are still in the car, deciding whether to come inside.

You bounce into her office with a loud, boisterous greeting and a quick practical joke at the coffee machine.

And how will that greeting impact your friend? Not helpfully. While it is on the funny side, this proverb is priceless to anyone who wants to be a friend.

Solomon's point is that we are to choose to interact with a friend in a way that will meet our friend at his / her point of need.

A wise person will respond to the sad face differently than to the happy face.

If your friend has recently had some harrowing experience, the expressions that best meet his need will be calm and tranquility. You'll give him that - even though you are ecstatic about something that's occurred in your own life.

If your friend has just received wonderful news and greets you with that news, you'll bless your friend by joining him in joy.

¹⁴ "friend's house."

You'll rejoice with those who rejoice and will weep with those who weep (Romans 12).

And here's one final cost of friendship we'll see today. Solomon says so much about it that we dare not pass it by.

Over time, a good friendship will not only be marked by good conversation and wise counsel. It will also be marked by well-placed silences.

Friendship costs SILENCE

Silence is golden when a friend has suffered great loss

[10:19] When there are many words, wrongdoing is unavoidable, But one who restrains his lips is wise.¹⁵

When your friend is exhausted or tense or depressed or angry or grieving, it is possible that your greatest gift to them will be the sound of silence.

More often than we would ever dream, it is just fine to have nothing to say.

Remember the story of Job.

After Job suffered devastating losses, three friends came to comfort him. For seven days they were wonderful comforters. They didn't say a word. Those seven days brought healing. Silence is golden when your friend is hurting.

And then this: Silence is golden when your friend trusts you with a secret.

¹⁵ The most therapeutic gift I received at my mother's funeral (I remember this moment from 1980 like it was yesterday) was an embrace, followed by a loving eye-to-eye look from a friend who didn't utter a word as the tears streamed down his face. I don't remember a single word said to me by anyone from that day. I'll never forget his silence.

Silence is golden when there is a confidence to be kept

[11:13] One who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, But one who is trustworthy conceals a matter.

Knowledge is power. If you become a friend as we have seen friendship described in Proverbs this morning, you will accumulate enough knowledge about your friend to sink him or her.

Over time, she has come to trust you with her secrets. You hold her life in your hands. And you can't ever violate that trust. You must keep that confidence confidential.

Gossip, sugar-coated as a prayer request, is still gossip. The relational cancer of gossip kills. It is death. Death to reputations, death to unity, death to friendships.

If we are willing to pay the price of friendship - space, sensitivity, silence - over time, we'll reap the benefits of friendship.

Proverbs tells us that there are lots of benefits to friendship. You get a relationship where there is presence, loving honesty, and wise counsel.

There will be a no-pressure absence of enforced obligation and silence when necessary.

And there is one more benefit that I'll mention today.

One of Friendship's (many!) Benefits

[27:17] As iron sharpens iron, So one person sharpens another.

Sharpening occurs when two hard objects strike each other. When iron meets iron, sparks fly. Sometimes the friction caused by the clash generates heat.

Deeper than surface-level friendship will bring about growth and change. Friendship will mature you. It'll sharpen you.

When friends interact, it may not always be “nice” and comfortable. But in that honest exchange both friends will grow and change into the people Jesus redeemed us to become.

Conclusion:

All of us who preach reach for more than we grasp. Some more than others. I more than most.

When I bring a message to you, I’m always convinced of the truth of what the Bible is saying and I’m usually pretty settled that what I’m saying reflects that truth.

And that is true today.

But I’ll also be the first to admit that while I think that what I’ve said today is true, I haven’t always lived out what Solomon says about the wisdom of friendships as I wish I had.

One of the things that happens in a church where a pastor hangs around for a long time (as I have) is that lots of people in the church end up knowing the pastor pretty well.

And lots of you know me.

You know my strengths and weaknesses. You know my faults and foibles and have seen me fail. And you know that I’m far from perfect when it comes to friendships.

But I aspire with all my heart to be the friend that Solomon describes. I want with all my heart to see us, here, live out the friendship model that Solomon describes.

Right now, you might be recognizing that you have a long way to go when it comes to being a friend, too.

Well, friends, here’s a very hopeful proverb for all of us who have yet to “arrive.”

***[Proverbs 24:16] For a righteous person falls seven times, and rises again,
But the wicked stumble in time of disaster.***

God gives us a lifetime of opportunities to stumble, get up by His grace, and walk again. I look forward to walking the path of friendship, even with stumbles along the way, with you.