

## “Two Are Better Than One”

Some boy scouts who were hiking in the country found a stretch of unused railroad tracks. Each scout tried his skill at walking on the rails. Most of the boys balanced precariously for a few moments and then fell off. They tried again with the same results. But two scouts had no such difficulty. Each stood on a rail, extended a hand out to the other, and balanced without faltering as they walked briskly along the track.

Like those boy scouts, we *need* each other. We cannot move very effectively through life without the help of others. Others need *us* as well. Our Old Testament Lesson is opposed to our ideal of individualism. All of us have heard or maybe even said ourselves, “I don’t need anybody.” But in actuality, life is a whole lot better with friends, than without friends. Living on an island would be a lonely existence. Friendship is a gift, one that is advocated in the Christian life.

Our Old Testament Lesson began with the words, “Two are better than one.” Our modern saying is, “Two *heads* are better than one,” and I don’t think lettuce is the subject of that conversation. It is an accepted fact that two can do more than one person; the writer of Ecclesiastes gives the reason: because they have a good reward for their toil. Cooperation is a good thing; learning to live with others is a lesson most of us learned, or should have learned, when we were young.

A few years ago, Robert Fulghum wrote a book, All I Ever Needed to Know I learned in Kindergarten. The basics of relating to others are gifts we receive during our formative years. How we get along with other people today finds its roots in the home where we were raised. We are products of our upbringings, and there is good news and bad news in that statement. Positive examples of relationships provide great stability for a child in molding how he/she will relate to others. On the flip-side of that coin, negative examples of relationships can also damage how a person learns to relate to people. But those with negative examples cannot blame their upbringing forever. At some point, adults have the ability to recognize that while they did not get what they needed from their parents, they still have choices to make as adults. While childhoods mold us, they do not have to define us.

In the passage from Ecclesiastes, we are given three common examples of why two are better than one. The first is “If a person falls, his/her friend will be able to assist the fallen.” This is obviously true at a literal interpretation. If I turn my ankle in my yard, a friend can assist me to my feet. If I am working alone, I may have to lie there until someone comes along. This is also true on emotional and spiritual levels. If someone is depressed or blue, a friend can help listen or simply provide a ministry of presence. Sometimes our availability and presence are enough for someone to know that they are not alone. Likewise, when someone experiences spiritual distress, it is encouraging to know that they can call on trusted friends to discuss their dilemma. Hopefully, there have been times when we have extended grace to the person who is fallen and helped them up. That is the example that Christ has given to us; we are to offer the same to others.

Many of you have said to me “I don’t know what I would’ve done without my friends.” When we are down, distressed, depressed, and under duress, it is comforting to know that we have friends, isn’t it. We know that with a phone call, we can have someone at our side. A person without friends is to be pitied said the author. “Woe to the one who is alone when he falls and doesn’t have anyone to help him.”

To illustrate this point, allow me to enter the world of advertising: the latest self-help book, \$30; an annual membership to a health club to feel good physically, \$800; a well-rounded education to prepare for the real world, \$100,000; the support of good friends during a crisis, priceless. We can seek to have the Lone Ranger mentality; we can continually say “If you want to do a job right the first

time, do it yourself;” we can ostracize ourselves from society because of whatever reason, but the bottom line is that we *need* other people. Friends are priceless.

There are certain things we simply cannot accomplish ourselves. Verse eleven reads, “If two lie together they are warm, but how can one be warm alone?” There should be no sexual connotation in reading verse eleven. It is simply common sense. We can help each other, even in our sustenance. And we should. Sure, most of us do not need financial assistance to pay our bills each month, but if we have a debilitating illness, how great it is for friends to help each other. It is a common occurrence in our congregation. When a church member’s family is bereaved or comes home for the hospital, or when a church member has a baby, many of you provide food. And sustenance is certainly not limited to food. Without friends, I wonder how people make it from day to day.

The third example given involves strength in numbers. An Aesop fable also speaks to our Old Testament Lesson idea that a three-fold cord is not easily broken. “A farmer who had a quarrelsome family called his sons and told them to lay a bunch of sticks before him. Then, after laying the sticks parallel to one another and binding them, he challenged his sons, one after one, to pick up the bundle and break it. They all tried, but in vain. Then, untying the bundle, he gave them the sticks to break one by one. This they did with the greatest ease. Then said the father, Thus, my sons, as long as you remain united, you are a match for anything, but differ and separate, and you are undone.”

The writer of Ecclesiastes knew the importance of working together. “Though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him.” The same is true in sharing a burden with someone. We all share differing degrees in relationships. Acquaintances are people we recognize, know their name, and a few facts about them. We don’t know *them* as much as we know *about* them. I would classify a “friend” as a person with whom we share common interests, a person with whom we are familiar enough to know details about their own story and history, a person with whom we can share ourselves.

In every year of grade school, I had a best friend, a best buddy. I had many friends, but I generally just had one *best* friend. The next year, if that person was not in my class, I would get a *new* best friend. But as I grew older, I realized that friendship took many faces. Now I would even say that there is another rung on the ladder labeled relationship above “friend,” and that is “soul-mate.” That person would be an individual with whom you can share the most intimate details of yourself: your hopes, dreams, fears and failures. That kindred spirit is not shaken by distance nor time. It is a person that will be the same when you speak to them next, whether that is next week or next year. By definition, we have only a handful of soul-mates in our lifetime.

Much has been written on friendship. Twentieth-century Philosopher Kahlil Gibran in his book The Prophet writes about friendship, although I would classify his perspective as writing of a soul-mate. He writes “And a youth said, Speak to us of Friendship. And he answered, saying: Your friend is your needs answered. He is your field which you *sow* with love and *reap* with thanksgiving. And he is your board and your fireside. For you come to *him* with your hunger, and you seek *him* for peace.

“When your friend speaks his mind, you fear not the “nay” in your mind, nor do you withhold the “ay.” And when he is silent, your *heart* ceases not to listen to his *heart*; for without words, in friendship, all thoughts, all desires, all expectations are born and shared, with joy that is unacclaimed.

When you part from your friend, you grieve not; for that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence, as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain. And let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of the spirit. For love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its own mystery is not love, but a net cast forth: and only the unprofitable is caught.

And let your *best* be for your friend. If he knows the ebb of your tide, let him know its flood also. For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to *kill*? Seek him always with hours

to *live*. For it is his to fill your *need*, but not your *emptiness*. And in the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures. For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed. (Kahlil Gibran. The Prophet. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1923. p. 58-59)

True friends do the unthinkable for each other. I read a story, which many of you will remember, in another church's newsletter, and thought it would be appropriate to share today. It is easy to understand a mother risking her life or even giving her life for her children or one spouse for another, but it is a rare act of courage indeed when one is willing to die for a complete stranger.

On January 13, 1982, such a condition occurred. Immediately after taking off from Washington, D.C., Air Florida Flight 90 began experiencing difficulties. The flight crew of the Boeing 737 struggled to keep the plane in the air, but failed. It first hit the George Washington Bridge, and then plunged into the cold icy waters of the Potomac River.

Many men and women showed extraordinary heroism that day, both rescuers and victims, but none was braver than Arland D. Williams. He was one of six survivors found clinging to the tail section of the aircraft. The freezing waters of the Potomac were rapidly draining life from these individuals.

A helicopter flew quickly to their rescue. Each time the helicopter crew lowered a floatation ring to Mr. Williams, he would pass it onto one of his five fellow victims. Several times the helicopter left for safety and returned for more, but Mr. Williams would always refuse the life saving ring and pass it to another. Surely he must have known that hypothermia would soon bring unconsciousness; that he had only minutes to survive, yet he seemed more intent upon the safety of others.

When the helicopter returned that last time to rescue Arland Williams, he had disappeared. Finally losing his battle with consciousness, he slipped beneath the frigid dark waters and drowned.

This heroic man had been faced with a difficult choice: the choice between his own life and the lives of others. He chose to save others rather than himself. When faced with a similar decision, Jesus did the same for us. John recorded Jesus as saying, "Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." As he gathered with his disciples in the upper room the night before he died, he called his disciples his friends. And the next day, he gave his life for his friends.

We are also to be counted among Jesus' friends, because he laid down his life for you and for me. And because Jesus is our friend, we never have to wonder about being alone, about having no one to share our inner-most secrets, or about facing difficult times. As our friend, Jesus will always be there. His presence should never be doubted; his reliability should never be questioned; his motive should never be challenged. He simply loves us. And because Jesus is our friend, two are better than one. That's why we can say with confidence, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Thanks be to God that we can call Jesus our friend.