

Disability Sunday July 5th 2015 – Sermon outline

Readings 1 Samuel 18. 1-4 and 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

If possible, it would be good to preface your sermon by showing this 3 ½ minute video clip. It's worth, however, pointing out to your congregation that while the content is very good, the terminology is outdated, as the term "mentally handicapped" is no longer acceptable to disabled people in the UK.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_xDRTXb-o

In 2014 Through the Roof conducted a survey of disabled Christians and their experience of Church. Many points were raised, but the number one issue was that people in churches who don't have disabilities are simply not extending genuine friendship to disabled people in their churches.

Even in churches that are quite inclusive on Sundays disabled people don't feel they are chosen as friends outside of church activities, and many parents of disabled children said that their children are accepted within the children's work of the church but never get invited for play dates with other church children. Jesus said His disciples would be known by their love for one another.

So what does genuine Christian love and friendship look like? Two important aspects of it are set out in today's readings.

Firstly, the friendship between David and Jonathan was soul-deep: "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and he loved him as his own soul." There's nothing superficial about friendship in the Bible. So what is involved in a soul-deep friendship?

Friends reveal their secrets to each other. Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15.15) Jonathan didn't hesitate to tell David that he was in danger from Saul. This kind of openness is a mark of true friendship.

Friends enjoy face to face conversation. We're told (Exodus 33.11) that God spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to a friend. Some disabled church members are really good listeners. In our survey many of them expressed a longing to be able

to listen to others who were going through hardships. That's the kind of friend everyone wants!

Friends enter into each other's feelings. According to Paul, God's people are devoted to each other in brotherly love (Romans 12.10). If a disabled church member came to you in the grip of a deep emotion and wanted to unburden himself, would you be sufficiently devoted to him to stop what you were doing, listen and offer support?

Friends know God through loving each other. John said, "If we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us." (1 John 4.7) Could you open your heart to love a disabled member of your congregation? Or to love a disabled neighbour and introduce them to your church? There's something supernatural about genuine love – in practising it we find we encounter God Himself in a new way.

Friends feel the other's absence keenly. When David learned of Jonathan's death, he sang a lament and grieved very openly. John Swinton sees this as the essence of belonging, as opposed to just being included in church:

"The problem we have with society is a real emphasis – and a quite right emphasis – on inclusion. I think at one level that's fine. However, inclusion is simply not enough. To include people in society is just to have them there. All we have to do is make the church accessible, have the right political structures, make sure people have a cup of tea at the end of the service or whatever. There is a big difference between inclusion and belonging.

To belong, you have to be missed. There's something really, really important about that. People need to long for you, to want you to be there. When you're not there, they should go looking for you. When things are wrong, people should be outraged – absolutely outraged that people are doing things against people with disabilities."

(John Swinton, http://www.ucobserver.org/interviews/2013/02/john_swinton/)

Secondly, true friendship involves entering into covenant with each other before God. A covenant is a solemn and binding agreement made in the sight of God. We see this both in our second reading, where David pledged himself to be a good, godly leader of God's people by entering into covenant with them and in David's friendship with Jonathan ("And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself." 1 Samuel 18. 3).

A few chapters later Jonathan made a fresh covenant with David, in the full knowledge that it would be David and not he who would succeed Saul as King. This is another characteristic of covenant friendship – preferring the other's success to

one's own. We see this also in Daniel 2. 49, where Daniel used his position of influence in the King's court to secure advancement for his three friends and not for himself. Paul valued Timothy's friendship because he knew he could depend on him to have genuine concern for the welfare of the other believers, and this was a rarity (Philippians 2. 19 – 21).

Perhaps the supreme example of covenant friendship in the Bible is Ruth's attitude to Naomi: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." (Ruth 1. 16-17)

Consider what effect it would have on disabled people, who are often the most isolated in society, if we formed these kinds of friendships with them. Consider what effect it would have on the church. And consider what effect it would have on society, if we began to model true Biblical inclusion – the embracing of disabled people into our family.

Suggestion:

At this point it would be good to bring in some members of the congregation to share their experiences – perhaps two long-standing friends who could talk about what their friendship means to them, and possibly a disabled person whose words might make uncomfortable listening, about their experience of friendship in the church, and how this could be improved.



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