

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Art of Living: Friendship

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Ruth 1:5-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

The church has never had, or has rarely had, a theological definition of the word marriage. That may seem like an absurd statement, because if you talk to most people they think they have a very clear idea of what the word marriage means. And you often hear people say that what is most needed is to get back to the biblical model of marriage. Now you know that's a person who has never really read the bible carefully. That's a person who has memorized little verses from the bible but they've not gone into the strange places and really thought about what stories, like the one we're looking at today, really imply about sexual ethics and marriage in general. You have that idea that you often hear church people say; that marriage - a biblical marriage - is between one man and one woman. Again, that's about as dishonest as you can get. Half the guys in the bible had multiple wives; a lot of them impregnated their maids if their spouse could not get pregnant. You have relationships that are so close to one another that we'd probably call them incest in this culture. And what you see is a real fluidity of the external aspects of marriage and a real emphasis on the relationships themselves, on the faithfulness itself.

That statement that you hear often at weddings, where it says "where you go I will go, your people will be my people, your god will be my god", usually what's left out is that its two women talking to each other. That little detail gets left out of that story of biblical marriage. But think about what that's saying, "Your people will be my people". If you're an American, I'll be an American, if you're with the Taliban I'll go with you there. "Your god will be my god". If its Judaism or Christianity fine, join Scientology I'm there. Whatever it is, it can be a very scary statement, or it can be a reminder that friendship is the foundation of nations, and of religion itself. And that you don't warp your national politics in ways that make it impossible for people to be human beings, and you don't develop theologies and moral codes that make it impossible for some people to fulfill who they are as human beings. We would know that, if we gave the real biblical emphasis, which is on friendship. Whether it's male-female, whether it's slave or free.

We're in a series that's talking about the art of living and we're looking at sacraments in a very non-Presbyterian way. What I'm suggesting is that Catholics are a lot closer to a kind of living art by saying that there are not just the two sacraments that the Presbyterians discovered. I know this is so heartbreaking. But you need a sacrament for birth, you need a sacrament for when you choose who you are, you need a sacrament for when you choose your job, for relationships, for breaking up relationships, for getting through birth to the grave. We need communal art, and that's what a sacrament should be. Not a magical ritual where you eat a wafer and all of that. Not dipping a baby in water so the devils don't come get it. That's all magical thinking and it's as superstitious as it can possibly be. But to have a community that celebrates every step along the way, that is something beautiful, and I would suggest, something sacred.

Now, I want to talk about friendship as the foundation. You'll have several friends, hopefully very good friends, in your life, and one of them may be considered a spouse. But you don't focus on the sexual stuff to understand the friendship stuff. The church has been so obsessed with sex that it really has nothing sane to say about certain circumstances where people cannot fulfill a cultural model; and not biblical cultural, American cultural. Because if we're looking at the Bible cultures, you've got stuff that stretches every kind of way, shape and form – it's Gumby City, it stretches into all kinds of shapes depending on what people needed at the time. After a war, you may have a handful of men and if you don't go into multiple family situations there're people that lived absolutely alone. So around the world at certain times – I'm not recommending this - but very often as in the story we're looking at today, communities have been decimated and they want everyone to experience intimacy. And so the idea of marriage changes and it's elastic and it's human and humane.

In the ancient of days friendship was seen as a virtue. Aristotle said that life is not worth living without friends, and he said there are three traits – he was a good preacher – three traits of friendship. We're not going to go exactly point by point but just by way of starting the conversation, he said there should be an enjoyment of each other's company, a mutual enjoyment of life; a certain usefulness for one another; and the third, which is very strange for us, is a common commitment to something greater than themselves. A common commitment; people coming together to serve a higher purpose than they would have alone. We're going to reframe that a little bit but that's going to be the kind of framework that I'm hoping you'll begin to think about marriage in a new way. Because we've got a big reformation that needs to happen. If Christianity is going to be helpful and not harmful, we've got to reframe from the ground up, to get back to the kind of humanity that you see in stories like this.

Now that first idea of enjoying one another, I'm going to call that intimacy. And in this culture we have reserved a certain depth of intimacy for only the sexual relationship, and I want to suggest that's neurotic. And we focused on sexuality, who touches what, when and where, in a way that we should have outgrown in grade school. Because the essence is communication, communion, respect, reciprocity. Now this is a different virtue set than ethics. Ethics are how you're going to treat everybody generally around the world. Those are universal. But if you're going to live deeply and profoundly and intimately with a small group of people, you need a different type of virtue that responds one-on-one to others. One of the most horrific aspects of our culture is where young couples are trying to find the right person and there's no community around them to support them. We'll get back to that in a minute, but the pressure that puts on people, to always be wise, to always be rested, to always have it all together is more than human beings can bear. So what Aristotle said is to be a friend of everybody is to be a friend of nobody. Ethics you can do with everybody in the world, you can treat everybody with respect but each person is unique and individual. And if you're going to get in deep, emotional relationships with other people, there's going to have to be a discipline that protects and bonds. And that's what we're talking about - there need to be rituals of friendship, both in marriage and for just for people that you want as a part of your inner circle for living, and as your support for living.

The second trait he calls mutual usefulness. I want to talk about egalitarian, equality; reciprocal, mutual, consensual, where one person isn't always the parent and the other person the child. That's true physically, when one person's very old and the other person's very young; that can be a problem when one person has power and the other person doesn't have power, that can also be a problem. But psychologically, to have each person's work valued. That's not saying everybody has to do the same things. But if you're doing the financial stuff, and somebody else is doing the cooking stuff, that they're treated equally with equal honor.

Now Ruth and Naomi are very different people and their needs are very different. Naomi is getting older, she's lost the people she cared about in life, she's very unselfish, and she's letting her other daughters-in-

law go to find a happier life. But she needs a companion. She's too old, she thinks, for the reproductive side of it, so she's not looking for a husband, she's looking for a soul mate and it happens to be a woman. Close your ears! Same-gender, same-sex relationship. Not sexual, but friendship – deep, abiding friendship, as important to them as marriage has been or maybe even more so, more intimate, deeper. What Ruth needs is a mentor, and there are lots of guys out there but they don't feel very safe to her. Now she's going to wind up marrying her uncle, and the way she's going to do that – close your ears again – she's going to (and in the Hebrew poetry it's a lot clearer, English tries to get around it in the translations) sleep with the guy first, and then say, because we're related you have to take me in. Now I'm not recommending that, don't hear me saying that I think that's a good idea. What I'm saying is, that the bible says that there are certain circumstances where that was the only possibility that was there for these people to live with integrity, to live with intimacy. So the second thing is this kind of equality. It's not that everybody does the same thing, but that the gift you bring to a relationship is seen as having equal worth with what somebody else brings.

The third thing is the strangest, and that is, you're coming together to work mutually for a better world, for a higher good. That's what makes it a virtue. Two selfish people coming together are never going to be fully happy. Have you ever had somebody who told you they were lying to somebody else, and they trusted you as a friend and said I'm cheating these other people, I'm lying to these other people, and kind of winked at you and you knew inside ok, I can't trust this person. If they're going to lie to somebody else, what conditions might change where they will cheat me too. Only a friend who you know is aiming at virtue is trustworthy. You and I are only trustworthy if we're aiming for it too. We'll fall short, we'll make mistakes, but that's how we'll know we can trust each other, to have that pole star that we're aiming at. That only happens in community. We need each other - when the baby cries, when you're lonely, when you're wounded.

Have you ever been depressed at the same time your partner was depressed? Those things happen. It's not calibrated right, and their depression makes your depression worse so you don't want to hear about it. It's not fair to put yourself in that situation. We need a sacramental community, a community that shares life across the board. There are some things you share with this person, other things you share with *this* person, and those have to be very clear. But that's how we get through this thing together. That's an art that's missing in our culture, in our place in time. To really appreciate what those personal relationships mean, because life isn't going to be fair.

If you've been trying to have God as your friend, I don't have to tell you that hasn't worked out for you very well. That personal relationship with invisible people has its limits. Whatever poetry you use like that, should guide you to other human beings. A religion that undermines your relationship with other people is missing the point that's here, 'where you go I will go, your god will be my god. Your nation will be my nation'. The foundation is human friendships, human relationships. And that becomes your world. Does anybody remember Buscaglia? In the first service, no one remembered and I felt really old. He was Oprah before Oprah was Oprah. He was the hugging psychologist. You just need a hug! He said, just as one plant can become my whole garden, so one friend can become my whole world. Now I want to make it bigger than that, not just one friend but a community that includes and embraces and makes sacramental your friendships and your relationships, that honors them and respects them. We live at a time when a lot of your friendships are outside of any one community that you're in. You know we're never going to get back to the kind of community where we all share the same donkeys and camels and things. It's not going to happen, your life is very complicated, but we can honor those relationships. And you do it by realizing that friendship is the foundation - not sex, not gender, not reproduction - that those things are supported by a more foundational set of virtues that deal with friendship.

Now I get to close in a very fun way, for me anyway, hopefully for you too. Sometimes I write the sermon and sometimes the sermon writes itself. I got up early, as I often do, to kind of pull everything together and I went to the restaurant, and it was just great. The first song they played was *Going to the Chapel*. This is like the child's view of what marriage is going to be.

Goin' to the chapel and we're gonna get married.
Gee, I really love you and we're, gonna get married.
Goin' to the chapel of love.

Spring is here,
the sky is blue.
Whooooo! the birds all sing as if they knew.
Today's the day, we'll say, "I do"
and we'll never be lonely anymore.

Then the second song was *96 Tears*, which was great.

OK, then there were a couple of songs that didn't have anything to do with anything, but then I was so happy when this came by, Stevie Wonder's *For Once in My Life*. And I think it's probably a romantic song, and I think it's probably a marriage-type song, but it also understands the sacred nature of friendship. I'd never really printed out the words and looked at them before:

For once in my life I have someone who needs me
Someone I've needed so long
For once, unafraid, I can go where life leads me
And somehow I know I'll be strong

For once I can touch what my heart used to dream of
Long before I knew
Someone warm like you
Could make my dreams come true

For once in my life I won't let sorrow hurt me
Not like it's hurt me before
For once, I have something I know won't desert me
I'm not alone anymore
For once, I can say, this is mine, you can't take it
As long as I have love, I know I can make it
For once in my life, I have someone who needs me

Now that's a romantic song, it's a marriage song, but I suggest it's coming from a much deeper place, the place that Ruth and Naomi lived in. I suggest it's a hymn to the sacrament of friendship.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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