My Soul, My Life, My All—1 Sam 17:55-18:9

Some people seem to have many friends, and others seem to have very few, or none, that we know of. I’m on facebook, though I don’t think I’ve posted anything to my personal page so far this year. For those who may not know it, the facebook term for people you are connected with via facebook is friends. Some people on facebook have upwards of a hundred facebook friends. I’m not sure, however, that every single one of them is a friend as I would define the term.

The definition of a friend is as blessedly simple and elusive as the definition of love. That is not a coincidence. Love is one of the key elements of friendship. Can you really say someone is your friend if you do not love her or him? So we’re back to that definition of friendship. We all have many acquaintances: people we’ve met, people with whom we’ve chatted a few times, people who know our names, who smile and wave at us. That does not make them our friends, though. Would you say that someone who knows your name and has spoken with you a few times is your friend? That seems like a pretty low threshold for friendship. Maybe it just speaks to our underlying desperation in these times to have friends, real friends.

It could be that my expectations or understanding of friendship is too high. Yet if I happened to have car trouble out at some lonely crossroads late at night in winter,

and if I happened to have the phone number of someone who knew my name with whom I had chatted a few times, and if I called him to ask if he would come and help me, my guess is that I would hear some excuse, more or less plausible, about why he would not be able to help. So I’ll tell you part of how I define a friend, a true friend: a friend would come out and help me, there at that lonely crossroads late at night in winter. We can mention love and friendship in the same breath.

Would you say that Jesus loved his disciples? Would you say his disciples loved Jesus? Jesus calls his disciples his friends (Jn 15:15). That’s how he regards them; that’s how he regards us. He’s not just saying that—Jesus truly is our friend. I hope you’ll let that sink in and keep sinking in. Part of the assurance Jesus gives us that he is our friend comes as he tells us that he is in us and we are in him. Take a moment to think about that: it’s sort of a strange thing to say. How can I be in someone else, and how can someone else be in me? What does it mean to say I am in you? How do I get in you, and how do you get in me?

We’re talking about love, now, yet Jesus is talking about friendship. Friendship and love are inseparable. Love defines friendship, true friendship. I suppose, then, that Jesus is in us, and we are in him because of love. Jesus is also speaking of the spirit. When he breathes on his disciples he gives them his spirit (Jn 20:22), that breath of life about which I spoke with you a few weeks ago, that *ruach* that is so important in the Bible.

I suppose you could say, then, that Jesus is in us, and we are in him, through the spirit we share. Love is the essence of that spirit. That is what our reading for today from 1 Samuel reminds us of.

It’s instructive to learn how other people read the Bible. I grant you that the way the Bible records the relationship between Jonathan and David can seem a bit mysterious, unusual—in very old language, we would have said the way the Bible records their relationship is queer. We can’t use that word anymore, though, in its original sense, any more than we can use the word gay in its original sense. Those words have been lost to us.

I hope it will not shock you to learn that many male homosexual readers of the Bible find little mystery in the way the Bible describes the relationship between Jonathan and David. Such readers believe they understand very clearly what the Bible is saying, or at least the subtext. But is that what the Bible is saying?

One thing I can say about sin—from personal experience as well as observation—is that sin distorts. Where there is distortion there is sin. That is part of what it means that we will see God face to face in heaven. We do not see God now, and cannot see God now, because of the profound distortion of sin. Don’t get too exercised about that word, sin! What I mean by it, fundamentally, is alienation from God, distance from God. Sin separates us from God. Sin manifests itself in all sorts of wrong acts, wrong words, wrong thoughts,

hurtful acts, hurtful words, hurtful thoughts—acts, words, and thoughts that hurt others; acts, words, and thoughts that hurt ourselves! Sin, however, fundamentally, is distortion, distance, alienation from God.

The Bible has a lot to tell us about distortion, about sin. The Bible also offers correctives. Take that relationship between Jonathan and David, for example. There are not many relationships in the Bible more susceptible to misunderstanding. That tells us more about us than about them, though. That tells us more about the distortion squatting deep down in our minds, our hearts, our souls, than anything those words in the Bible are literally describing. The Bible, beloved, is an excellent mirror, and we see ourselves reflected back to us in what we read. The image is not always so pretty, but it’s true.

“The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam 18:1). We see our own poverty here so clearly, our own impoverished souls. I have a friend I’ve known for twenty years. If I weren’t a guy, I wouldn’t be ashamed to say I love him. Can a man tell another man he loves him? In this day and age, it seems fraught with difficulty and misunderstanding—distortion. Would you say Jesus loved his disciples? Did Jesus love Peter, John, James, and the rest? Would you say that Jesus’ disciples loved him? Did Peter love Jesus? Did John?

The ancient world seems to have had a much more robust, fuller, healthier, and more delightful understanding of friendship than we are able to muster today. And yet we like to crow about how enlightened and advanced we are! Now, we guys know that women have friendships; we are aware here of several very longstanding and rich friendships between women in our own congregation. And we see what a blessing those friendships have been and are, and maybe we guys are just a little jealous. I wish I could have friendships like that! Brothers—we can! We do, in Christ.

We sometimes think that the New Testament is about Jesus and the Old Testament is about . . . about . . . well . . . about what happened before Jesus. Yet Jesus himself tells us that he has always been (Jn 17:5). That means that when we read the Old Testament, too, we’re reading about Jesus: the Son working together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This relationship between Jonathan and David is not really all that confusing. The love Jonathan and David share is Jesus! Huh? What? Look—what binds the disciples to Jesus is spirit, friendship, and love. What Jesus offers is spirit, friendship, and love. We can even say that the Son is spirit, friendship, and love. So, if we can say that Jesus is love, and we do say that God is love, then this amazing, wonderful, rich, deep, and true friendship that Jonathan and David enjoy they have through Jesus. We perceive Jesus in that love, that friendship that binds soul to soul.

Is it any wonder that it gets misunderstood? Isn’t Jesus always getting misunderstood? Isn’t that part of why he was killed? And isn’t it also true that Jesus was killed because some people really did understand who he was, and wanted him dead because they knew who he was?

If you can get Jesus out of the way, then you can define terms however you like, or you can say there is no true definition. If there is no true definition, there is only distortion. But if distortion is all there is, how can we call it distortion? Distortion assumes that there is something not distorted. We can only know distortion when we know truth, beloved. The world is eager to do away with truth because then there can be no distortion. God, however, is doing away with distortion, so that there will only be Truth.

This relationship between Jonathan and David is ripe for distortion because distortion is what we’re mostly familiar with. Let’s not misread this relationship, though, and let’s not let others get away with misreading it. This is too important just to let slide. True friendship is too important to let this slide. Grace, faith, and love are too important to let this slide. Jesus is too important to let this relationship slide into distortion.

Are you bound to the soul of Jesus? If you’re not, we need to talk! Does Jesus love you as he loves his own soul? If you’re not sure, we need to talk!

We especially need to talk because David has just given Jonathan every reason to love him. David, alone, without armor, between two very large and very hostile armies, has just gone out and defeated, with a small rock, a huge, lumbering, intimidating, angry, taunting, overwhelming enemy. Remember Goliath? Isn’t David, here, just a bit like Jesus, even if only in a very distant way? Jesus, also, with only his stripped down body, defeats a huge, lumbering, intimidating, angry, taunting, overwhelming enemy: call it sin, death, evil, and/or Satan. I can tell you, beholding that sight, beholding that unmatched act of bravery and faith and hope—and love—my soul is bound! My soul is bound just as much as Jonathan’s.

Jonathan was no coward. He was a brave and strong warrior, and he knew that Goliath was certain death for him. What David does and how he does it should always stagger us, bowl us over, knock us to our knees with amazement, admiration, and joy. God was using David to show the way, and Jonathan was the first to see it and understand it. And we wonder what it could mean that Jonathan’s soul was bound to David’s soul, and we scratch our heads about what it could mean that Jonathan loved David as his own soul!

It’s symptomatic of how far we still have to journey in this benighted world, beloved, through this benighted world among so many benighted people crowing about how enlightened they are and how enlightened the times, and how enlightened our society, that we do not perceive at once what is going on between Jonathan and David.

And it is symptomatic that we do not quite get what Jonathan does next. Biblical scholars wonder whether Jonathan is symbolically abdicating in favor of David as Jonathan gives him his robe, armor, sword and bow and belt. They can’t quite decide. It’s not an insignificant question, but for our purposes right now it’s not an urgent question. What is Jonathan doing? He’s giving David his very best, the best he has to offer, including his own life, his loyalty and devotion. The Bible tells us that “Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam 18:3). By that covenant, Jonathan pledges to give his very best to David. Short of the prophets, Jonathan is quite possibly the most perceptive figure in the Old Testament. He sees David and sees God giving His people His very best. Of course, in return, Jonathan pledges the best he has to offer.

Jonathan gives us an example. God gives us His very best. Like Jonathan, pledge your very best in return.

And to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, true priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.