

“A friend”
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12
Wayne Eberly
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Just about everything under the sun falls under a common verdict in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The verdict is that it is all meaningless. Lest we miss how meaningless things are, the preacher reminds us 33 times that everything is meaningless. The work people do, the rising and the setting of the sun, the water that flows into the sea, evaporates, and is returned to its sources where all streams begin, pleasure, toil, wisdom, folly, it doesn't seem to matter. The author of Ecclesiastes claims to have surveyed it all, the good, the bad, and the ugly of living, and it all adds up to one thing. Meaningless.

In some ways, we can't help but agree. At one point in his extended, and exhausting reflection on how meaningless life is, the preacher observes that the righteous get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked get what the righteous deserve. (Ecclesiastes 8:14) We have all observed that in one form or another. What does the preacher say when confronted with such a travesty of justice? Meaningless. Meaningless. If you wade into the depths of Ecclesiastes, you might wonder if anything escapes being categorized as meaningless. The answer is welcome, because the answer is yes. Yes, there is something that escapes the judgment of being meaningless. That thing that seems to stand beyond the helpless description of meaningless is something very near and dear to us as human beings. In fact, it is one thing that gives meaning to our lives. The thing that is not declared to be meaningless is friendship.

Without using the word friend or friendship, Ecclesiastes four offers a wonderful reflection on what a blessing it is to have a friend. Beginning with the absence of a friend, the predicament of being alone, and remember, way back in Genesis chapter two God said, “It is not good for man, or for woman, to be alone,” beginning with the predicament of being alone, we read:

“There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. ‘For whom am I toiling,’ he asked, ‘and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?’” This too is meaningless—a terrible business! (In other words, being alone stinks. Indeed, being alone is meaningless. It is not how God intended things to be) So the preacher moves from being alone to this profound observation of life. “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together they can keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4:7-12)

Our Tuesday morning bible study is working our way through the Writings of the Old Testament, a significant number of writings which fall under the umbrella of Wisdom Literature. Ecclesiastes is part of the Wisdom Literature. Ecclesiastes follows immediately upon the heels of the Proverbs, which are definitely a part of the Wisdom Literature. As we worked our way through the Proverbs, the authors of the study suggested choosing a theme, and then reading through the Proverbs to see what wisdom we might draw from the Proverbs. Now even though what I am about to share with you all comes from the Proverbs, what I present to you is very subjective. It is all how I view and interpret what I found in Proverbs. What I did is to take the word “Friend”. I read with the goal of exploring what we might learn about being a friend from the wisdom of the Proverbs. You might do the same thing and come up with something completely different. That is okay with me. But I will say I like what I discovered about being a friend.

A friend is...

- Patient: “Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.” (14:29) In the same way, “A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.” (15:18)
- Kind: “Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs him down, but a kind word makes him glad.” (12:25)

- Does not envy: “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.” (14:30)
- Does not boast and is not proud: “A fool’s mouth lashes out with pride.” (14:3)
- Does not dishonor you: “The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy.” (12:22)
- Is not self-seeking: “An unfriendly person pursues selfish ends” (18:1)
- Is not easily angered: “Fools show their annoyance at once, but a friend overlooks an insult” (12:16)
- Keeps no record of wrongs: “Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.” (17:9)
- Does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth: “The heart of the righteous weigh its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.” (15:28)
- Always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres: “The wise in heart are called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction.” (16:21) “Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” (16:24) “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” (17:17)
- Never fails to be there for you: “One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (18:24)

What did I discover as I sought to understand what a friend is by using the Proverbs. I discovered that a friend is patient, a friend is kind, a friend does not envy, a friend does not boast, a friend is not proud, a friend does not dishonor others, a friend is not self-seeking, a friend is not easily angered, a friend keeps no record of wrongs. A friend does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. A friend always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. A friend never fails. Admittedly, I framed my search in such a way as to come to this conclusion. But knowing that these are the very things the Apostle told us are true of love in that wonderful passage found in I Corinthians 13, I

feel pretty confident if these are the friendships we develop, we will not be disappointed. And, just as important if not more, we will be the type of friend who does not disappoint others.

Hearing those words of friendship being patient, kind, protecting, trusting, and so much more, caused me to reflect on one particular friendship. That one particular friendship captured so much of what it means to be a friend. It is the story of two friends, two friends who were a married couple. Their names were Bob and Emma. Bob and Emma were members of our church in Houston. How do I know? I met them at a restaurant and Emma told me they were members of our church. She also said, "We're members of the church, but you will never see us. We go to our farm in the country every weekend." I admit I was taken aback. Emma said they were members, and Emma said we would never see her. I can testify with complete confidence and accuracy Emma was a woman of her word. We never saw Emma and we never saw Bob in worship. This was in 1995. Then, in 2012, more than seventeen years later, I saw Emma at church. She was not in worship. She was in my office. Bob had died. She came to talk with me about his memorial service.

Emma was really a spunky person, and with a smile she said, "I told you so. You never saw us in worship, did you?" I admitted that I never saw her in person. I don't know that I have ever met anyone who seemed happier about telling the pastor she was never in worship. Over the next hour or so, Emma told me why she and Bob were never in worship, why they always went to the country, and why they went every single weekend.

What I discovered that day in 2012 was that Emma was a homemaker in the best sense of the word, in the fullest sense of the word. When they married, Bob said the most important thing to him was to have a home. His mom died when he was one. Bob was the youngest of five kids. The kids were all shipped out to be cared for by others. Bob never really experienced a home life as a kid. When they got married Bob told Emma his most important thing was having a home. And Emma went to work. Having a home always included having a church home. She said Bob was fond of saying he was a Methaterian (they felt

equally comfortable in Methodist and Presbyterian churches, and Emma said Catholics had an influence as well, but they couldn't figure out how to incorporate that into the name). They loved Jesus Christ, and his love shaped their life.

For Emma, helping Bob to build a home life was never a problem, never an inconvenience. The two of them shared this desire. The two of them were partners in this dream. When Bob was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 1989 the doctors told Emma how important it was to build routines that give life order and pattern and predictability. Dutifully, faithfully, lovingly, Emma set up a schedule and established a routine. They would leave Houston at the same time on the same day of the week every single week and travel to the farm. There, they would tend the land and Bob would ride the tractor. They would go to church in the country every Sunday, part of the 18 faithful worshipers at that small Methodist church. Then at the same time and on the same day of the week every single week they would pack up from the farm and drive back to Houston. That kind of routine and discipline and patterned living, living that never forgot the importance of a relationship with God, living that modeled the love that is patient and kind and that never fails, sustained this couple for the 23 years Bob lived with Alzheimer's

While building a home life can be hard work, and it takes discipline and commitment and perseverance, visiting with Emma reminded me it can also be one of the most joyful pursuits a couple can have. And it can be fun. There can be laughter and silliness and humor. In fact, there has to be laughter and silliness and humor when you face something as challenging as Alzheimer's. Emma told me of the day at the farm when Bob was on his tractor, which he loved to drive, and Emma was walking nearby, doing some work on the land. She tripped on a vine and fell down. Bob saw what happened, and so he came to help. And sure enough, he tripped on the same vine and fell on top of her. There they were, together, tripped up and flat on the ground. Emma said they both just started to laugh, and they laughed and laughed and laughed.

Thinking of two of them on the ground reminded me of the words of wisdom from Ecclesiastes. The writer of Ecclesiastes sees a lot that

doesn't make sense in life, a lot that he calls meaningless, but that writer finds meaning in at least one thing. "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

When I met Bob and Emma in 1995 and Emma said, "We are members of your church, but you won't see us", my first impression was all wrong. I thought they were just whiling away their time in the country. I couldn't have been more off the mark. In the country they were building a home, a life that would stand up during the most difficult of storms. And they weren't doing it alone. They were doing it as husband and wife, as friends who were there to pick one another up when they would fall. And perhaps most importantly, they knew that it was only a cord of three strands that was not easily broken. They pursued their relationship with God. They found a church in the country, and they gathered to worship and pray and share in the love and support, and to seek God's will and God's way.

When Emma left that day she said with a smile, "You might see more of me at church." As I gave her a hug, I was thinking to myself, "Emma, you've always been with us. We might not have seen you and Bob often, but you've always been with us. You have been living the Christian life and building a Christian home and sharing in a Christian marriage, leaning on one another as true friends do. What you have done and how you have lived means more to me, and more to others, than you will ever know."

Friendship is a wonderful gift. Friendship is an amazing blessing. But friendship takes work. Friendship takes commitment. Friendship faces a challenge, a struggle, a loss, a sadness, a sorrow, a transition, a death, a disability, a disappointment, friendship faces any and all and even more of these things with the understanding, "We are in this together." And may we never forget, there is something mysterious and

very meaningful in the saying from Ecclesiastes about the third strand. You have heard it already a few times this morning. Listen again:

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Friendship is not just two people, not just strand one and strand two, two individuals who come together and are bonded with all the things that make a true and lasting friendship. For people of faith, we believe there is a third strand, and it is that strand who holds it all together. Jesus is the third strand. Jesus is the one who binds our hearts together in love. Jesus is the friend who sticks closer than a brother. What a friend we have in Jesus.