

Be Loyal to your Friends

Ruth, 1 Samuel, John

Turn to Ruth 1 please. O'Brian wrote novels set in the British Navy about 200 years ago. These novels follow the lives of two friends, Jack Aubrey, who is a sailor and the ship's captain, and Stephen Maturin, who is the ship's doctor.

The first novel of this series was called *Master and Commander*, and a few years ago there was a movie made based on that book. There are 20 novels in that series, and I have read them all, and was sorry when done. May re-read them some time.

The friendship between these two men is a warm important part of the story. They are not much alike, at all, though they share a few interests. But they have a deep attachment to each other. When Jack introduces Stephen to someone, he calls Stephen his "particular friend." "This is Stephen Maturin, my particular friend."

The teaching today is about three particularly close friendships in the Bible: Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, and Jesus and the beloved disciple (who I assume is John son of Zebedee, though the Bible never says that).

We're looking toward our covenant of membership Sunday in two weeks. This week and next we'll talk about our relationships in the church, since that's what our covenant is about.

I have come to realize that friendship is sort of ignored in church teaching, myself included, and that the Bible has some things to say about friendship. I want to encourage you to value and guard your friendships. If at all possible don't leave them. Sacrifice yourself for your friends. *Greater love has no one than this: that one lay down one's life for one's friends* (Jn 15:13).

Ruth Binds Herself to Naomi (1:15-18) - "Look," said Naomi [to Ruth], "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "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.

¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

No one else in the Bible makes promises to another person like Ruth does. Not even death will separate Ruth from Naomi. It clearly goes past marriage promises. We're not told what moved Ruth to bind herself to Naomi before God like this, and we won't guess. But bind herself she did.

There is a big age difference here, and also a race difference. Ruth ignores all that. The initiation here is all on Ruth's part. Naomi did not ask for this, or return it. Ruth asked nothing of Naomi, she made herself totally open to Naomi's wishes. And she meant it.

There is a family thing here. In v8, Naomi told Ruth to go back to Ruth's mother's house. That would be the normal thing. But Ruth left her mother and family to join Naomi and hers.

Ruth Proposes a Marriage of Convenience (3:7-9) - *When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down.* ⁸ *In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!* ⁹ *“Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”*

Back in v4, Naomi suggested this plan to Ruth, and told Ruth, “Boaz will tell you what to do.” But instead Ruth to Boaz what to do. “Spread your garment over me” amounts to a marriage proposal. “Marry me.” And then: “You are a guardian-redeemer of our family.”

In other words, “Marry me, Boaz, **to help me serve Naomi**. Marry me so we can give a child to Naomi. You're related to Naomi's dead husband, you have a duty here yourself.” Boaz agreed.

This marriage existed to help Naomi, and Ruth was clear on that from the first sentence. If it was for Ruth, she could have gotten a younger man, and she could have gotten a richer man. Boaz knows that and says it. But to help Naomi, the husband needed to be a relative of Naomi's husband. They both get this, and so they marry, and this has God's complete blessing.

Successful Marriage: Naomi gets a son (4:13-17a) - *So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.* ¹⁴ *The women said to Naomi: “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel!”* ¹⁵ *He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”* ¹⁶ *Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him.* ¹⁷ *The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!”*

Naomi took the child in her arms, and cared for him. The women said, “Naomi has a son.” That is why Ruth proposed marriage to Boaz in the first place, that's why Boaz said yes. With God's help, the marriage was successful, it did what Ruth and Boaz wanted.

I'm going after something here that's a bit delicate, but it needs to be said. In order to do what she did, Ruth completely left her home and her extended family. She did it for friendship with a troubled older woman. She did not do it to get married, she did it for a friend.

When Ruth got married, she did not move away from this friendship. The very opposite. Ruth married Boaz **so Ruth could be a better friend to Naomi**.

We assume, I assume, that family relationships are more important than friends. But we get there too quickly. We have a Messiah because Ruth did not think like that. Naomi was more important to Ruth than Ruth's birth family, and more important to Ruth than Ruth's marriage.

I'm sure Ruth was a good wife to Boaz. Normally close friendship and good family relationships exist together. There is no problem. That's how it should be. Scripture supports family relationships all over the place. But it also supports deep friendship, and we sometimes lose that. Scripture does not support our assumption that family is always more important than friends.

Jonathan Binds himself to David (1 Samuel 18:1-4) *After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. ² From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. ³ And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. ⁴ Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.*

Here again, the first initiative is one-sided. There's no response from David. Jonathan (1) became one in spirit with David, (2) he loved David as himself, (3) Jonathan made a covenant with David [we get details later], (4) because Jonathan loved David as himself. A bit like Ruth to Naomi, on the road back to Judah.

Both Ruth and Jonathan made deep promises to their close friend. Seems foreign to us.

David was now in Saul's royal court. Probably not dressed for it. Jonathan gave David the clothes of a prince, and weapons of a prince. But there's more here: Saul was anointed king of Israel. Then God rejected Saul's line, and anointed David. Jonathan will know this.

There are now two royal families in Israel, Saul's family and David's family (just himself at this point). Competing royal families killed each other in those days, including in Israel. By tying himself to David, Jonathan was being disloyal to his family. It would be the same now.

If Saul stays king, then Jonathan is the next king. David is Jonathan's competition. But Jonathan loves David as himself, and gives David his prince's clothing and weapons. It is a remarkable move on Jonathan's part, as earlier on Ruth's part.

Jonathan and his father Saul Separated because of Friendship (1 Samuel 20:30-34) - *Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you?" ³¹ As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Now send someone to bring him to me, for he must die!"*

³² "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" Jonathan asked his father. ³³ But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David. ³⁴ Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; on that second day of the feast he did not eat, because he was grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David.

Saul says, "as long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you [Jonathan] nor your kingdom will be established." That is certainly true. It was also true that Jonathan siding with David brought shame to Jonathan's father and his mother. That was true. But to Jonathan, his father Saul brought shame on himself, by how he treated David.

What I want you to see here is that Jonathan and David are not just young men who become close friends. There is a powerful family element going on, and Jonathan is forced to choose between family and friend. He did not want to choose, but his father forced the choice. Jonathan chose his friend, because his friend was more honourable than his father.

The Final Goodbye 1 Samuel 20:41-42 - *After the boy had gone, David got up from the south side of the stone and bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together—but David wept the most. ⁴² Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.’” Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.*

This was the covenant they had earlier made with each other. Their families were competing royal families, but David and Jonathan and all their descendants would be friends. As Ruth made her promise solemnly before God, so Jonathan and David had made their promise solemnly before God. Jonathan would not turn back from this because his father insisted.

It is not one sided any more. It started Jonathan’s doing, but now David weeps the most. Then they parted, and probably did not see each other again.

David’s Lament (2 Samuel 1:25-26) *“How the mighty have fallen in battle! Jonathan lies slain on your heights. ²⁶ I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.*

Here again we see the depth of David’s love. Jonathan my brother. You were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful. David responded to Jonathan’s love for him. Your love for me was wonderful. More wonderful than that of women. Both David and Jonathan were married, but Jonathan’s love went past that, for Jonathan and for David.

Be loyal to your friends. Take care of them, stick with them, value them, guard your friendships. Don’t leave them if you have to. David had to leave or he’d be killed. Don’t leave lightly. Normally family relationships and deep friendships exist together without tension. When there is tension, think carefully, don’t assume the best choice is always family.

John the Beloved Disciple (John 13:21-25) *After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.” ²² His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. ²³ One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. ²⁴ Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.” ²⁵ Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”*

Why does John call himself the disciple that Jesus loved? I was taught that Jesus loved them all the same, and what set John apart was that he valued that same love they all got. But I have come to question that. In this story, it is clear that John is sitting closer to Jesus than any other disciple.

He’s close enough that if he leans back, he’s leaning against Jesus. He’s close enough that he was Peter’s natural choice of someone to have a quiet one to one talk in a room with 13 men.

Of the 12 disciples, we know Jesus was closer to three, Peter, James and John. Three times he picked those three for special events: the raising of the dead girl in Mark 5, his transfiguration, and in the garden of Gethsemane. In each of those Jesus chose those three. Within the 12, Jesus had that inner circle.

Most of the time all 12 were together with Jesus. We have three stories of Jesus with these three men, and there are dozens of stories with Jesus and the 12. That was the normal group. But Jesus was closest to these three. There is no evidence that they were better disciples, more godly or devout than the rest. No, they were friends of Jesus.

And it seems that within those three, John was Jesus' closest friend. John considers himself to be Jesus' particular friend, in the words of Jack Aubrey. I suspect that if the other 11 heard John describe himself that way, they would have agreed, "yes, Jesus was closest to John."

Jesus picks John to take care of Mary (John 19:25-27) Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Jesus was the oldest son, and he was responsible to care for his mother. That was part of: Children, honour your father and your mother. But he would not be able to do that. But Jesus had brothers, James and Jude and others. They would have taken care of Mary. For some reason, Jesus did not want that. He asks a long term commitment, a family commitment, from John, and gets it.

He gave his responsibility for his mother to his friend rather than his brother. He had the right to do that, and he did so. For me this is the clincher, that John was the particular friend of Jesus, that Jesus was closer to John than to the other 11, there was a bond between Jesus and John that went past the others. I can see no other explanation for Jesus putting Mary and John together.

Let's wrap this up. I have always assumed that we were supposed to love everyone the same, even though in practice that is impossible to do. I did not think the Scripture encouraged friendships like this. And I have assumed that family was the first loyalty, always more important than friendships. These stories today all make me think more carefully about this.

Marriage is not the only place God's people can make long term promises of faithfulness to each other, they can also do this with friends. When you get married, don't just leave your friends behind, as if those relationships are not important any more.

I think our church does quite well with this. There are all kinds of good friendships going on here. I know some wish for more friends than they have. But on the whole there are good friendships here. I am teaching this, though, because there are people here without family relationships. Committed and loyal and loving friendships are ESSENTIAL for these.

And there are unmarried people. But outside of marriage, people can have friendships where they are one in spirit with each other, and love the other as they love themselves, as Jonathan and David. Outside of marriage, people make lifelong promises of love and loyalty.

These three examples are all friendships between the same gender, women with women, and men with men, and I assume the Scripture to be deliberate about this. There will be close ties between men and women in the church, like brother and sister, but the three exceptional relationships we've covered stay in the same gender, and we should follow that.

Jesus said (John 15:13), *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's **friends**.* A few verses later Jesus said, *I no longer call you slaves, because slaves don't know the master's business. Instead I have called you **friends**, because I told you everything the Father told me.* And Jesus also said, *You are my **friends** if you do what I command.*

In these lines, "friend" is the highest possible relationship we could have with Jesus. That's how Jesus saw it, and it is the highest possible relationship with could have with each other. Friendship is a loving relationship, where people lay down their lives for each other. Let's guard our friendships, and treasure our friendships. Amen.