

"Companions Along Life's Journey"

Ruth 1:8-16; Colossians 3:12-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 23, 2014—7th Sunday after Epiphany—Rev. Ronald Botts

Two men were traveling through a forest when, all of a sudden, a huge bear appeared from out of nowhere. One man spotted the creature before his companion and, seeing the danger, scampered up a nearby tree.

The other fellow was walking with his eyes down and didn't see the bear until it was too late. He realized he couldn't fight the animal alone, so he did the only thing he could think of: he fell to the ground and lay perfectly still. Well, the bear came over close to his face, sniffed at him a while, then just walked away.

The man in the tree climbed down. "Boy," he said, "that was close. Say, it looked as if that bear whispered something in your ear while you were on the ground. What did he tell you?"

The other fellow stared at his companion for a moment, then replied, "He said it isn't wise to keep company with one who deserts a friend in time of danger."

That's a bit of wisdom from Aesop's fables. It's a very old story but it still has its kernel of truth. That's why such ancient tales still find a place in the modern world. Circumstances change, but human nature remains the same as it always was. People act and react in predictable ways. The moral of this particular fable might be, "Be careful whom you choose as a companion for your journey."

Our Old Testament reading tells of one set of cohorts who can truly be held up as exemplary. It's the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. Now Naomi, her husband, and two sons lived in Bethlehem some 400 years before Jesus. Because of a famine they emigrated to Moab where there was fertile, well-watered land that could sustain them in hard years.

While there the two sons each married native women. Their names were Ruth and Orpah. The peaceful and prosperous life of this family, however, was changed forever when the three men all died and left the women as widows. Whether it was an epidemic, or just coincidence, we're not told. The famine in Bethlehem had passed and Naomi decided that it was best that she return to her people.

She told her two daughters-in-law that they were under no further obligation to her, and they should return to their own nearby families. Because they were still young, they could remarry among their own people. Naomi loved the two women as if they were her own daughters, but she could do no more for them. She gave them the best advice she could. Orpah heeded it, kissed her mother-in-law for a last time, then headed back from where she had come.

Ruth likewise heard Naomi's words, yet she chose differently. The older woman continued to encourage her to go back to her family, but Ruth answered instead with these moving words: "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

These words no doubt reflected the deepening relationship between these two women. This story also reminds us of the friendship between David and Jonathan, who were described as having become as one in spirit.

Of course examples of companionship are not limited to the Old Testament. You'll remember Jesus' call of those who would become his disciples. Other examples of special friendship are evident in the

Bible, too, such as that of Paul and Barnabas. Our second scripture today describes the type of close relationship that exists among those who follow Jesus.

Thinking about ourselves today, we recognize that the people we associate with is largely chance. We don't choose our relatives, nor generally our neighbors. Unless you're the boss you don't select those with whom you work. But friends... with friends we have a choice.

For most people at least one true companion, one significant other, is important in life. A close relationship helps to ground us and gives us perspective. We have a better sense of ourselves when another is regularly part of our lives. It reminds us we have value even if we aren't perfect.

Have you ever noticed that young children will often create an imaginary friend? The friend may have some tangible shape, such as that of a favorite doll or a stuffed animal. Sometimes that friend may be more make-believe.

Watch a child with a tea set and some dishes. Most often the table will be set for two. Listen carefully and you may even overhear a conversation. "Would you like some cookies? I just baked them today. You'll like them. I'm so glad you came." In the other chair Raggedy Ann slouches at an angle, but then posture doesn't matter when friends gather.

One of the main reasons we pledge ourselves to another is so that we will share companionship. It's truly joyful when your spouse, your partner, is a true friend with whom you can spend your days and nights. And how hard it is should we no longer have that person in our life. A part of us is lost when we no longer share their company.

Now it was typical for Jesus to link himself and others. Our Master was not at all a hermit who isolated himself away from people. He was always there in the midst of crowds, most often accompanied by his disciples. Even children would come to him and he welcomed them as his own. The Gospels make it clear by such constant mention of Jesus sharing a table with others that it's a characteristic we associate with him. People needed him, but I think he needed others, too.

Some time ago Maxine Fritz wrote a brief devotional piece about growing up in Alaska. In particular she remembers days long ago when she helped her father clear the wilderness into farmland. One of the first things they did was to pull the charred logs from forest fires of earlier years into huge piles for burning.

She writes this: "One day as we watched the fires glowing, father said, 'Reminds me of a lesson about people.' While we watched, a single log rolled away from the glowing mass. For a few minutes it continued to glow, but gradually grew less and less red, and finally turned black. Father said, 'See what happens when a stick tries to burn alone? It's the same with a person. We all glow more brightly when we link up with others, when we encourage one another.'"

It's not by accident that the Christianity developed along social rather than individual lines. It took its shape from Jesus who knew that we need to be in community. We can attest to this through our own experience. Even in the confusion following the crucifixion, Christ's fellowship continued to function. Faith was spread from Israel throughout the Mediterranean world, then beyond, primarily through the formation of congregations. Yes, people are always converted one by one, but they grow best when in the company of others. That truth is still evident today.

In life we need those special relations, those few close friends, who can be an intimate presence for us. We also need the companionship which is part of our families and the church. All these different relationships are important. Our places of connection serve to make us be better, stronger, and more resilient people. It is where we receive, but it's also where we give.

Camus put it this way when he wrote: "Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me, and just be my friend."

These thoughts apply to any committed relationship, but let's not forget they also apply to our church as well. We need to give one another the best that we have. We need to be there for each other at times of joy and sorrow. We need to give generously and receive gratefully. For in such manner we show our love for another; and in these everyday ways we are a witness to Jesus and to God who sent him.

We all have our unique passageways through life. Sometimes those paths take us where we have planned. Sometimes they are not of our own choosing. But wherever we travel, on fair days or foul, we always travel best with company.

Take a few moments and look around you today. You'll see all the other folks that have come together in this family of faith. If you don't know some of them well as yet, make it a point to do so. Here in this room, and within our fellowship, is a place where we can find true friends.

The more we let our circle of relationships grow, the more likely we'll discover that we need not feel alone in life. Here, right at hand, are some who can be our companions for the journey... and we for them.

Together... we grow best in faith. Together... we become our better selves.