

“Soul Friends”
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

A couple of years ago a comic strip called "Opus" showed a fallen teenager, spread-eagled on the sidewalk. Around him are some electronic devices and some distraught passers-by. The alarm goes out that this young man has been "un-entertained" for twenty minutes! His IBook is dead, and his iPod. His iPod, his blackberry, his Nintendo DS, and game-playing, musical phone are all gone! Un-entertained for twenty minutes! The friends try to connect an archaic desktop computer, but the electrical cord is too short. In a final, last-ditch effort to revive him, they put a newspaper in front of him, but, alas, the newspaper takes too much effort. And in the final panel comes the somber news, "We lost him." This is a funny description of our current cultural obsession with technology. Personally, I love computers, the internet, my cell phone, and am very thankful for all the technology that we have. At the same time I see that our technology has intensified our sense of separation from others. With our being busy or entertained all the time, there is very little time for fully developed friendships. There is very little time for people to connect with one another on a deeper level. We seem to have lost the ability to discern reality with others in the presence of God because even when we discuss things with our friends, there is very little time to listen to the voice of God in the conversation. The noise of our world that is filling every space of our lives has also filled our minds with a static that suffocates our ability to listen to the deeper voice of wisdom. This kind of noise and inability to be fully in the presence of God and of others diminishes our ability to discover truth in our lives. In his book, *Reaching Out*, the late writer and teacher Henri Nouwen asks, "How do we know that we are not deluding ourselves, that we are not selecting those words that best fit our passions, that we are not just listening to the voice of our own imagination?...Who can determine if [our] feelings and insights are leading [us] in the right direction? Our God is greater than our own heart and mind, and too easily we are tempted to make our heart's desires and our mind's speculations into the will of God. Therefore, we need a guide, a director, a counselor who helps us to distinguish between the voice of God and all other voices coming from our own confusion or from dark powers far beyond our control. We need someone who encourages us when we are tempted to give it all up, to forget it all, to just walk away in despair. We need someone who discourages us when we move too rashly in unclear directions or hurry proudly to a nebulous goal. We need someone who can suggest to us when to read and when to be silent, which words to reflect upon and what to do when silence creates much fear and little peace."

In our Bible story for today, King David is in need of such a guide who can help him face the truth about his own actions. King David neglected his day job as the king and went for an afternoon stroll on his roof. When he saw Bathsheba, who was married to Uriah the Hittite, taking a bath, he sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her." (Chapter 11) After that when Bathsheba got pregnant, he tried to cover it up by asking her husband to go home from his army duty. But when her husband refused, David commanded that Uriah be put on the front lines so that he could be killed for sure. When Uriah was killed as David had planned, David took Bathsheba as his wife. All along David was deceiving himself and living in his lies. No one seemed to question his decisions. Of course who would dare to question the king's personal decisions, no matter how immoral they may be? By questioning the King's decision, even his closest advisors would risk their lives.

But this was not the case with Nathan, the prophet. He was different from all the other advisors and friends. Nathan was a prophet, a man who listened to God's voice and spoke the truth with which God inspired him. Nathan's friendship and care for David had enough room in it for deep listening to God's voice. Nathan was actually able to help David confront the truth about his behavior. Nathan was the only one in the kingdom who dared share this with David. He is like

the little boy in the story of "*The Emperor's New Clothes*." This is the story about an emperor of a prosperous city who cares more about clothes than military pursuits or entertainment hires two swindlers who promise him the finest suit of clothes from the most beautiful cloth. This cloth, they tell him, is invisible to anyone who was either stupid or unfit for his position. The Emperor cannot see the non-existent cloth, but pretends that he can for fear of appearing stupid; his ministers do the same. When the swindlers report that the suit is finished, they dress him in mime. The Emperor then goes on a procession through the capital showing off his new "clothes". During the course of the procession, a small child cries out, "But he has nothing on!" The crowd realizes the child is telling the truth. The Emperor, however, holds his head high and continues the procession.

Nathan was a man of God and a true friend for David who was willing to shed light on David's mistakes. But in the fashion of a true man of God, Nathan does not just tell David his judgment, he invites David to discover the truth for himself. He tells David a short story, a parable that helps David break through his defenses and let go of his blinders to see the truth of the situation. Nathan was a soul friend because he knew how to allow David's soul to emerge from hiding to help David see the truth. Even though this was a very painful experience for David, it was a very important one and not just for David but also for the whole people of Israel as David was their king.

Do we have people such as Nathan in our world today? And they are around, do we have the time and space to listen to them? Think of the many politicians in our time who have had affairs, do they have soul friends that help them see the truth? What about us? Do we have soul friends that help us see the truth? The invitation is for us today to slow down, to get unplugged a little, to take time to find such friends that are able to attend to our souls. If you don't have such a friend, I invite you to consider finding a spiritual companion or director. This may be a new concept for you but it is certainly not a new practice in our Christian faith. Spiritual direction is traced back to the early days of the Christian church when holy men and women--upset with the way Christianity was being institutionalized around power--withdrew to the deserts of the Middle East to seek God's wisdom. People followed these desert fathers and mothers into the wilderness, meeting with them in caves and other small spaces, asking them for spiritual guidance. Another place where spiritual direction flourished was among the Celtic people of the British Islands who emerged from Druidism to become followers of Jesus Christ. The Christian world around them at the time proclaimed that the most important relationship one could have was their relationship with the church, her doctrines, and the priest who would administer to them the sacraments. Outside of this, there could be no relationship with God. The Celts, on the other hand, understood that their relationship with God did not depend upon any institution. Yet, they believed that their relationship with God was deeply nourished through their relationship with a soul friend.

Spiritual direction or soul friendship is still practiced today and you can actually find a director for yourself in this area. There is a list for you in the bulletin of some of the resources available. A spiritual director is not someone who will give you the answers to your life. They are people who are willing to walk the spiritual journey with you to help you listen to the voice of God in your life. (Mercy Prayer Center in Rochester, Abby of the Genesee in Piffard)

In her book *Hearing with the Heart*, Debra Farrington writes, "We need to surround ourselves with those who can help us discern and stay on the path, but we also need spiritual companions who can encourage us and, sometimes, be our champions. The process of learning to listen to God and follow God's call is never an easy one, and we need others who can help us stay focused, who can encourage us when the going gets tough." Farrington goes on to name five

key characteristics of soul friends:

1. Soul friends know how to listen. They are not afraid of silence between friends. In fact, Farrington maintains, "they must be willing to listen for God as the third party in the conversation."
2. Soul friends ask questions rather than give advice. Offering solutions can often be a defense against entering fully into the pain of others. Soul friends "ask questions – sometimes hard and clarifying ones – that help us see God's will more clearly for ourselves."
3. Soul friends don't judge, but they're not afraid to ask hard questions either. As Farrington puts it, "If they are honest and care deeply about us they won't be afraid of asking questions that might be painful or difficult to answer."
4. Soul friends are good observers. With the benefit of their more objective perspective, they can spot trends or patterns in our lives that we're too close to see.
5. Soul friends admit that they don't have all the answers. They know that while they can offer valuable input, our discernment process must be our own. "I told you so" is not a part of their vocabulary.

Farrington concludes, "Obstacles to hearing and following our heart and paying attention to God's will cross our paths constantly. Loving companions can help us notice them, name them, and move ahead on the path to God . . . [Soul friends are] the people who see with the eyes and ears of the heart, with compassion, concern, and clarity. They are the ones who, when we think our only choices are to go forward or backward on the wheel, can help us discover that perhaps God is calling us to step off the wheel and go in a whole new direction."

It was important for the people of God to have prophets because of their role in listening to and speaking God's truth. This is the wisdom that helped the people of Israel stay connected to God's loving presence in their lives. It is the wisdom that can help carry us through life, especially in this time in our history when so many voices clatter for our attention. Even though it may be scary to truly listen to the voice of God in our lives as it was scary for David to face his own mistakes, we cannot afford not to listen.

There is a popular story of Graham Green, the great English novelist whose characters struggled with their conscience and faith. Green had waited nearly three years to get a fifteen minute appointment in Rome with the mystic saint Padre Pio. Just before their appointment, Greene attended a Mass that Padre Pio was leading and observed the priest at prayer. Then without keeping the appointment, he returned to England. When asked why he had left before meeting Padre Pio after having waited so long to see him, Greene said that he was not prepared for the way that man could change his life. Green knew that his soul would be called, that it would take charge of his life. The only way to try to prevent that, he felt, was to try to keep grace and divinity at a distance.

May you be blessed with enough courage to have a soul friend who will love you enough and know you enough to help you discover and follow the path of God's love that has been planted in your soul. Amen.

Resources:

Nowen, Henri. *Reaching out*.

Farrington, Deborah. *Hearing with the Heart*.