

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
With A Little Help from My Friends

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Mark 2:1-12

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President Abraham Lincoln often visited hospitals to talk with wounded soldiers during our Civil War. Once, doctors pointed out a young soldier who was near death and Lincoln went over to his bedside.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" asked the President.

The soldier obviously didn't recognize Lincoln, and with some effort he was able to whisper, "Would you please write a letter to my mother?" A pen and paper were provided and the President carefully began writing down what the young man was able to say:

"My dearest mother, I was badly hurt while doing my duty. I'm afraid I'm not going to recover. Don't grieve too much for me, please. Kiss Mary and John for me. May God bless you and father."

The soldier was too weak to continue, so Lincoln signed the letter for him and added, "Written for your son by Abraham Lincoln."

The young man asked to see the note and was astonished when he discovered who had written it. "Are you really the President?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Lincoln replied quietly. Then he asked if there was anything else he could do.

"Would you please hold my hand?" the soldier asked. "It will help to see me through to the end."

In the hushed room, the tall gaunt President took the boy's hand in his and spoke warm words of encouragement until death came.¹

There are times when we need someone to hold our hand to see us through. There are times when we must have a friend.

When our daughter Johanna was in Grade 7, she had a horrible time. Her friends turned upon her. She was accused of things she didn't do. They were mean to her, tore up her papers, and barked like dogs at her in the school yard. Under attack, Johanna became depressed and the wonderful, joyful baby that was born smiling (you can't tell me different, so don't try) now couldn't sleep at night and was afraid of going to school.

It was two of her teachers, Roy Wunderlich and Jim Schultz, who took this paralyzed child and her hand; cared for and inspired her. Even today, when Johanna is almost 27, she will still return to these two teachers for care. My wife, Vickie, and I will be forever grateful to their faith, which carried our child to a place of healing.

There was man in Capernaum, long, long ago, who was paralyzed. Gladly, he had friends who cared for him. When his friends heard that a healer named Jesus had come home to Capernaum, they went to their friend's house, and made a stretcher, that they might carry him to the home of Jesus. Upon arriving, they found that there were

¹ *The Best of Bits & Pieces*, quoted in *A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul*, eds. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, (Health Communications, Inc., Deerfield Beach, Florida, 1996), 49-50

many there who wanted healing. But such was the love for their friend that they would not let the crowd block them, and finding their way to the roof of Jesus' home, they tore open a hole and lowered their paralyzed friend into the room where Jesus was teaching. Jesus forgives and heals their paralyzed friend and he walks away.

There are times in our lives when we need friends to hold our hands, to see our distress, to carry us where we cannot take ourselves. We need friends who see beyond the obstacles that would stop us from being well and find ways that we might get to love and to healing.

Notice that it is not the friends who heal, but the friends who bring the paralyzed man to the place of healing. Friends bring friends to where they can find the love they need. It is in the bringing, in the faith that carrying a friend to the love of God will make for healing, that friends are friends.

In 1866, Dinah Maria Mulock Craik wrote:

*"But oh! the blessing it is to have a friend to whom one can speak fearless on any subject; with whom one's deepest as well as one's most foolish thoughts come out simply and safely. Oh, the comfort of feeling safe with a person - having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness, blow the rest away."*²

The following is a true story of a friend caring for a friend and it seems worth telling to you. Its author has chosen to be anonymous.

Angela knew that Charlotte, her best friend, was having a rough time. Charlotte was moody and depressed. She was withdrawn around everyone except for Angela. She instigated arguments with her mom and had violent confrontations with her sister. Most of all, Charlotte's bleak and desperate poetry worried Angela.

No one was on particularly good speaking terms with Charlotte that summer. For most of her friends, Charlotte had become too difficult. They had no interest in hanging out with someone who was so bleak and in so much pain. Their attempts to "be a friend" were met with angry accusations or depressed indifference.

Angela was the only one who could reach her. Although she would have liked to be outside, Angela spent most of her time inside with her troubled friend. Then a day came when Angela had to move. She was going just across town, but Charlotte would no longer be her neighbor, and they would be spending far less time together.

The first day in her new neighborhood out playing with her new neighbors, Angela wondered how Charlotte was doing. When she got home, shortly before twilight, her mother told her Charlotte had called.

Angela went to the phone to return the call. No answer. She

² quoted in Dear Abby, Helena Independent Record, 02/09/00

left a message on Charlotte's machine. "Hi Charlotte, it's Angela. Call me back."

About half an hour later Charlotte called. "Angela, I have to tell you something. When you called, I was in the basement. I had a gun to my head. I was about to kill myself, but then I heard your voice on the machine upstairs."

Angela collapsed into her chair.

"When I heard your voice I realized someone loves me, and I am so lucky that it is you. I'm going to get help, because I love you, too."

Charlotte hung up the phone. Angela went right over to Charlotte's house and they sat on the porch swing and cried.³

God has blessed us with such friends; friends who will sit on the porch swing and cry, or laugh, with us; friends who will carry us to God on days we don't want to go, or days we simply can't go on our own. By loving friendship, by the fellowship of believers, we are made whole in body and holy in soul. Because of God-driven friends, our lives are healthier and longer.

You don't have to take my word for it: there was a study recently conducted by Duke University, a good United Methodist School in North Carolina. Quoting the article:

Going to church and reading the Bible regularly may do more than save your soul - they may extend your life.

In one of the biggest studies of its kind, Duke University researchers found that people 65 or over who faithfully participated in religious activities were 40 percent less likely to have high blood pressure.

In particular, people who attend church weekly and read the bible or pray regularly had lower diastolic pressure than those who are less religious, the study found. High diastolic readings are associated with heart attacks and strokes.

While the study doesn't prove a causal relationship between belief in a higher power and good health, it does provide numeric evidence of another benefit of religious activity, study co-author Harold Koenig said.

*Numerous studies have shown that religious people are less depressed, have healthier immune systems and deal better with addictions than the nonreligious.*⁴

Having friends that carry us to worship on the days we don't want to go heals us. Having friends in a small prayer or study group who listen to us when we are paralyzed lowers our blood pressure and opens us to God's power for us. Friends carry friends to love. When you leave this place and time of worship, tell your friends thank you and be a God loving friend to all you meet, you will be a part of their healing and may save their life.

Shalom and Amen.

³ Anonymous by request, *Always Return Your Phone Calls*, in Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul, eds. Jack Canfield, Mark Hansen, Kimberly Kirberger, (Health Communications, Inc., Deerfield Beach, Florida, 1997), 55-56

⁴ article in Helena Independent Record, 08/11/99