



Don't Go To Any Trouble On My Account

SCRIPTURE:
Acts 24:22-23
Galatians 6:2

April 25, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are

You've got a friend. Just call out my name, James Taylor sang. I'll come running. Everyone needs a friend like that. Friendship is a common reality in life. But it can be something we take for granted as well. I have been thinking about friendship—particularly this past year—when it has been so difficult for us to connect with friends.

There is an ordination vow that has grown in its importance to me. Ordination vows... I'm talking about those vows we take as leaders in the church... elders, deacons, and pastors; we affirm these historic vows of the church. And one of them asks, "Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry?" At first, I thought it was odd to make a promise to be a friend. But I have come to believe that the deepest friendships don't just happen. They require intentionality. The wisdom of this vow is that the practice of friendship is holy work.

Facebook tells me that I have hundreds of friends; that's how Facebook defines them. Having lots of friends is a gift, but there are times in all of our lives when we realize friendship is not something that's measured in quantity but in quality. Because at the end of the day, we are defined by who we love and who loves us. That is what makes a human life human. One way to think of a Christian life is this: Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, among those with whom you share this faith—will you be a friend?

To begin this conversation, I am drawn to a moment in the story of the apostle Paul. Paul is in prison. It is a place he was familiar with. He had been placed in prison many times. The truth be told, Jesus did little to make Paul's life easier. Once Paul committed his life to the gospel—the good news—

he was ostracized, he was persecuted, he was beaten, shipwrecked, flogged, on occasion left for dead, and repeatedly imprisoned. And yet, we find in Paul a man of courage and joy.

Dr. Bob—he was the pastor who founded Village and served as her pastor for half a century—he is well known for his greeting, "Be of good cheer." Let me remind you that the Greek word for "good cheer" is *Tharseo*. *Tharseo* can be translated either "be of good cheer" or "be courageous." The same word holds both meanings; it is a word that describes that kind of joy that often requires courage. That courageous joy shows up when life is hard. Paul was a person of *Tharseo*. He faced the most difficult circumstances with courage. He was a strong man.

But in this passage, we find Paul in need. He is at the mercy of Felix, who is no friend of Paul's. Felix could release Paul from prison, but Felix is in no rush to set him free. A day is a day for Felix, but for Paul in prison, a day is a lingering hardship. But Felix says: Don't prohibit his friends from taking care of him. Paul wouldn't survive without his friends.

I wonder if that was easy for Paul. His friends would be those he has served as an apostle, those he has served as a leader, even as a pastor and spiritual guide. And now Paul, who has been so strong, finds himself dependent on the care of his friends. We tend to think that to be strong, we have to be the 'Oh, don't go to any trouble for me' type. 'No, I'm fine. I don't need any help.' We tell ourselves that's what courage looks like.

How easy was it for this strong, courageous apostle to be taken care of? Well, maybe he expected this. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he said this, "bear one another's burdens, in that you reveal the law of Christ." Bear one another's burdens. It's a

good metaphor for friendship.

But when we hear that verse—bear one another’s burdens—we hear it from the position of strength, don’t we? It’s Paul’s exhortation for us to take care of others. When your friends are in need, be the one who says, “I’ll come running, to see you again.” We want to be their bridge over troubled water. But that’s not what he says. He says bear one another’s burdens. If I understand it, it means sometimes you are the strong one; but sometimes, we are the ones who need strength. To bear one another’s burdens means sometimes we carry but sometimes, we are the one who need to be carried. Yes, sometimes as a friend, you are the bridge over troubled water but sometimes, you are the one who is weary and feeling small. And if I understand it, both are holy because both are human. And it is in the soil of authentic humanness that friendship grows.

But it is much easier to see ourselves as the strong one. But if we cannot admit our need when we have need, there is a loneliness that results.

In Wendell Berry’s novel, *Jayber Crow*, there is a strong man, an independent man named Troy. He is described like this: “Troy... was more or less alone... His competitiveness and self-centeredness cut him off from any thought of shared life.”¹ To men like Troy—and it may be a bigger problem for men—to men like Troy, the apostle says, sometimes you need to let your friends take care of you.

And here’s the point. I think there is a connection between the strength, the good cheer, the hope that we manifest in our lives, and the willingness we have to be cared for when we need it. The courage to let others be our strength when we can’t... it can become the food that feeds our strength, our courage, our hope.

My friend Dean is a pastor and he was making a hospital visit. This was in the 1980s and a member of his church was dying of AIDS. It was a scary time. We forget how fearful we were of folks with that disease—how cruel they were often treated. But not Dean. Dean sat by his bedside and they talked. From his deathbed, he said, “Dean, I’m not sure I have my

faith anymore. I just don’t know how to find God in the midst of this monstrous disease. And Dean said, “That’s okay. You lean on my faith right now. Let me believe for the both of us.”

Both of them were being faithful in that moment. Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry? It’s a good description of discipleship.

I imagine whoever those friends of Paul’s might have been, they had leaned on him more than once. And maybe they did not anticipate that the day would come when the apostle would need them but it did, and they were there. Maybe that’s why Paul knew that to live the law of Christ, we need to bear one another’s burdens. Sometimes you are the one who carries, and sometimes you need to be carried. If you know that, you are more likely to live a life defined by courageous joy and hope, it seems to me.

In April of 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., traveled to Memphis. You remember the story. King was one of the most important voices in our nation’s history. He was one of the most courageous and hopeful men to walk these lands.

The night before he was assassinated, he preached. Apart from his ‘I Have A Dream’ sermon, that night he gave what was probably the most well-known speech of his ministry. He told those gathered that night, “I don’t know what will happen now... Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now... God has allowed me to go up to that mountain and I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land.”²

That’s what Tharseo looks like. He was convinced that God was leading us to God’s promised day. That incredible sermon began in a less-recognized fashion. Rev. Ralph Abernathy introduced King that night. And King began his sermon by saying, “I listened to Ralph’s introduction and then I thought about myself and wondered who is Ralph talking about?” And then King said, “It’s always nice to have your closest friend say something good about you,

1 Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, 2000, p. 194.

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” *A Testament of Hope*, 1986, p. 286.

and Ralph is the best friend I have in the world.”³

I can't be sure of this, but it would not surprise me if one reason King, in the face of death threats that were ever so real, and in the face of hatred, and in the face of accusations that he was Marxist and unchristian... one reason he remained a man of courageous joy was because he knew when he was down, when he was weary, when he was fighting

back the tears, there was a man named Ralph who would come running.

Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry? To say 'yes' means sometimes you will need to bear the burdens of others and sometimes, just as importantly, you will need to allow others to come running to you. Both are human, and both are holy.

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," *A Testament of Hope*, 1986, p. 279.