

Scripture: Ruth 1:15-18; John 15:12-17; 2 Timothy 1:3-14

Walking Together

I met Brenda, Lyn, and Sally almost 45 years ago at Goshen College in Indiana. The three of them were from Goshen. I arrived from Illinois. We became friends and supported each other through the ups and downs of college life. After graduation, we scattered to graduate school at Purdue and Indiana Universities, teaching in Illinois, and MCC work in Lesotho in southern Africa. Eventually all three of them settled back in the Goshen area while I remained in Illinois.

Twenty-five years ago, I invited Brenda, Lyn, and Sally to leave their husbands and children and join me at my home for a weekend. This began an annual tradition. During our time together we talk, eat, laugh, cry, and play Mah Jongg. One positive outcome of the past few months is that we're no longer waiting for the annual get-away weekend. We've begun meeting via Zoom every Thursday afternoon.

These enduring friendships are good for my mental and emotional health. And, even though faith isn't always a topic of our conversation, these friendships benefit my spiritual health as well.

A few weeks ago, we began exploring spiritual practices – those activities that draw us closer to God. So far we've considered prayer, gratitude, hospitality, and Scripture study. Our focus today is spiritual companionship. These relationships take a variety of forms as demonstrated by Naomi and Ruth, and Paul and Timothy.

We could question if mutual spiritual friendship best describes Ruth and Naomi's relationship. They begin as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, living in Moab, a country where Naomi is the foreigner. After Naomi's son – Ruth's husband – dies, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem in the land of Judah, her homeland. She urges Ruth to stay in her own country where her social and economic prospects are much better than they would be in Bethlehem.

But Ruth refuses. She lives up to her name which derives from a word meaning friend or companion. She promises to stay with Naomi in life and in death. She promises to claim Naomi's friends and relatives as her own. And she promises to join Naomi in her faith. She trusts Yahweh, the God of Israel. Ruth recognizes that being connected to God and to a community of faith is vital to her well-being, even though living as a woman, a widow, and a foreigner will be difficult.

This is the main purpose of spiritual companionship – to help each other connect with God and with a community of faith. Sometimes a friend sees the presence of God in our lives more clearly than we see it for ourselves. Sometimes a friend sees what is standing between us and God. Sometimes a friend approaches God on our behalf when we aren't able to do it ourselves.

So, yes, Naomi and Ruth do appear to have a mutual, committed spiritual friendship. The relationship between Paul and Timothy might more accurately be described as a spiritual mentorship.

We first hear of Timothy in the book of Acts, chapter 16. Paul asks Silas to join him on a trip throughout Asia and Greece. He wants to return to the places where he preached about Jesus and see how the new believers and young churches are doing. Along the way, he recruits a young man. Timothy is the product of a mixed Jew-Gentile home, with a Greek father and a Jewish mother. His mother, Eunice, and grandmother Lois have taught him the Scriptures from childhood, and by now all three are believers. Paul is impressed with Timothy and decides that he would be a good addition to the ministry team.

The letter we call 2 Timothy is written by Paul to Timothy. It appears that Paul is in prison in Rome and believes he is nearing the end of his life. This letter is written by an older, experienced person to someone he has been mentoring and traveling with for a number of years. In this letter, Paul encourages Timothy to live the Christian life and exercise his gifts. He offers five pieces of advice.

First, affirm the presence of God within you. *I remind you, says Paul, to stir up the gift of God that is within you. Don't be embarrassed to testify about our Lord or for me, His prisoner. God did not give us a cowardly spirit but a powerful, loving, and disciplined spirit.*¹

Paul does his best to bolster Timothy up so that he will no longer be held back by fear. Christians have the power to follow God's ways and Jesus' example because we have the Spirit of God within us.

Second piece of advice is to rest on God's grace. *God has already saved us and called us to this holy calling—not because of any good works we may have done, but because of God's own intention. God gave us this grace in Jesus before time began. That grace was revealed when our Savior, Jesus, appeared.*²

This grace of God existed in Christ even before the world began. This grace of God was revealed in Christ here on earth – in his life and particularly in his resurrection. Grace is the substance of the gospel message. It's God's goodness and unmerited favor toward us. Recalling and resting in this amazing grace can comfort us in the midst of any anxiety or fear we might experience.

Third, be confident in the power of God. Here was Paul, a prisoner, suffering for the gospel. Yet he says, *I was appointed a preacher, emissary, and teacher of this message. This is exactly why I am suffering. But I am not ashamed because I know and trust God. And I am fully certain that God has the ability to protect what I have placed in God's care.*³

Instead of living in a permanent state of defeat or melancholy, Paul remembers in whom he believes. He is confident of the power of God. We too will experience defeat. We'll be discouraged. We'll be sad and angry. Remembering who God is brings us hope.

Fourth piece of advice, rely on the enduring truth of God's Word. Paul advises Timothy to *follow the pattern of true teachings that you heard from me in faith and love, which are in Christ Jesus. Protect the truth that you were given; protect it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*⁴

Timothy isn't without a direction for living. He has the sound teaching of Jesus Christ as initially taught to him by Eunice and Lois, and now by Paul. We have the written Word of God in the Bible, the Word of God made flesh in Jesus, and the renewing Word of God written on our hearts by the Spirit.

The entire letter could be summed up in the words found in 2 Timothy 2:15, make every effort to be the person God is calling you to be. *Do everything you can to present yourself to God as one who is fully genuine, a worker unashamed of your mission, a guide capable of leading others along the correct path defined by the word of truth.*⁵

We do our best to follow good instructions and examples. We do our best to avoid bad actions and influences. God's grace and love are available to us all the time. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. However,

¹ 2 Timothy 1:6-8

² 2 Timothy 1:9-10

³ 2 Timothy 1:11-12

⁴ 2 Timothy 1:13-14

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:15

if we continue to try to follow God's ways and Jesus' example, we will experience peace and abundant life even in the midst of suffering. And we will represent Jesus well in this world.

When practicing our faith, we need companions who serve as guides – spiritual mentors, or as peers – spiritual friends, with whom we can talk about our faith and with whom we can learn together on the journey.⁶ Each of us brings unique gifts to this endeavor. We learn about following Jesus from people who are a little like us and from people who are a little different from us, from people who are older than us and from people who are younger than us. And as we learn, we teach others – formally and informally, intentionally and unintentionally.

As I look back on my life, I can name a host of spiritual companions who accompanied me along the way, who served as friends or mentors. I was blessed with parents and grandparents who taught and modeled faith from the very beginning of my life. Bible study groups, Sunday school classes, and small caring groups continue to provide spiritual friendships. During seminary, two pastors mentored me in two different congregations. Professors and peers guided me along my journey to the pastorate. During my first two years with this congregation, June Thomsen served as my mentor. I poured my heart out to my pastor peer group and listened as they poured out theirs. We've challenged, supported, and prayed for each other. A few years ago, I began talking weekly with my friend, Brenda, who pastors a church in Indiana. Now these weekly chats have expanded to include Lyn and Sally as well.

I hope you can name previous and current companions on your spiritual journey. Relationships change along the way but we continue to learn from each other as we seek to follow God and follow our calling to reach out to the world around us.

While he was on earth, Jesus invited a community of disciples to form around him to carry on his ministry. Reading from John 15: *This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you. The greatest love a person can show is to die for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I heard from my Father. You did not choose me; I chose you. And I gave you this work: to go and produce fruit, fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you anything you ask for in my name. This is my command: Love each other.*⁷

We live in a culture where individualism can lead to isolation. But Jesus speaks a message of interdependence, calling us to love each other and give deeply of ourselves to each other. We need each other.

I pray that all of us continue to seek companions to walk the journey of faith with us. I pray that we seek opportunities to learn from each other. Learning from those who look on the complexities of life with fresh young eyes. Learning from those who have questioned those complexities for many years. Learning from those who look to the past and the future as they trust in God's grace.

May we seek to strengthen our relationships in order to help each other know God better and follow God's calling to reach out to the world around us. Thanks be to God for the gift of this life, and for those who walk with us. Amen.

⁶ The remainder of this sermon draws from Week 6 Worship Resources written by Alissa Bender, *Leader, Summer 2018*, Vol. 15, No. 4, ©2018 MennoMedia p. 46.

⁷ John 15:12-17, *New Century Version*