

OUR FRIEND IN HIGH PLACES (Genesis 18:1-17)

He was born in Tulsa. He grew up in Yukon, OK. He went to OSU in the early 80's on a track scholarship. His job on the team was throwing the javelin. While he was in school, he earned a degree in advertising. After graduating, he stuck around Stillwater a little longer. He was a pretty good guitarist; he liked to sing and write songs. He got his start in music by playing in clubs and bars. One of the places he frequented was Wild Willie's Saloon in Stillwater. I've never been there, but I've driven by there many times. It is right there on the strip, just south of the campus.

In 1987 he and his wife moved to Nashville. Two years later he released his first album. Within another year he released his second album, which ended on becoming his best-selling album. Five of the songs on that album reached number one on the charts. Garth Brooks had arrived.

In the recording industry, if 500,000 people buy an album it is considered a gold record. If it sells 1 million units, it is a platinum record. Two million sales makes it a multi-platinum record. It takes 10 million sales to become a diamond record. Garth Brooks has 9 diamond records. The closest to him is the Beatles with 6. During his career, Garth Brooks has released 23 albums and 77 singles. He has sold more than 170 million records. He has been inducted into the Musician's Hall of Fame, and in 2020 he became the youngest recipient of the Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song. That award goes to a composer or performer for their lifetime contributions to popular music.

At that award occasion, Garth was allowed to speak and sing some of his songs. Before him were US Congressmen, US Senators, and other notable figures who occupy positions of power and prestige. Among the songs he sang was one that came from that second album. It is a staple for his live performances. It has become so famous and so iconic that when he sings it, the crowd joins in.

If you are not familiar with it, the song tells the story of a jerk who shows up uninvited to his ex-girlfriend's wedding reception. He takes the groom's champagne glass and offers an inappropriate toast to his ex-girlfriend who is now the wife of another. In the chorus of the song, he explains that he has friends in low places.

I saw that performance on television several years ago, and thought it rather odd to see men and women who stroll the halls of power in our nation's capital singing about having friends in low places. I didn't know whether I should be comforted, scared, or just amused.

I imagine we all have friends in low places, and if you don't, you may know someone who considers you their friend in low places.

Today, I want to talk about "Our Friend in High Places." Jesus called His disciples His friends. It is possible for us to be Jesus' friend. According to Philippians, Jesus has been highly exalted and has been given a name that is above every name (2:9). This past week, I read in Psalm 47 that God is a great King over all the earth, and that He has gone up. Verse 8 of that psalm claims, "God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne."

Despite His exalted position, you and I can have a friend-ship with God. Three times in the Bible—twice in the OT and once in the NT—Abraham is called the friend of God. You can read that in 2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8, and James 2:23. That latter text reads, “And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God.”

Abraham had a Friend in high places. You and I can, too. We are going to look at what is involved in being friends with God. Our text is Genesis 18:1-17. Before I read the first 8 verses, let me remind you that in the previous chapter, at the age of 99, God had again told Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude of nations and that God would make him exceedingly fruitful. It was at this time that he changed his name from Abram to Abraham. In that same chapter, God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah.

Who were these three unnamed guests who showed up in front of Abraham’s tent? The text doesn’t make it clear, but I believe one was the pre-incarnate Jesus, the Son of the God. The other two were angels. These three came with a message for Abraham.

Without knowing who they were or why they had come, Abraham sprung into action. He sought to show these travelers exceptional hospitality.

Over the next two Sundays, we are going to focus on two, main ideas. Next Sunday, we will examine God’s friendship towards us while today we will seek to understand how we demonstrate our friendship towards God. The governing thought of today’s message is:

Our Friendship with God is to Be Practiced

Friendship requires action. It has been said, “To have friends, you must be a friend.” Being a friend means going out of your way to show care and concern to someone else. Our text illustrates three things we can do for God.

1. As God’s Friend, We are to Welcome Him.

Hospitality was a big thing in the Jewish culture. In that day, traveling was an arduous task. It was dangerous. There were not hotels as we know them. You couldn’t call ahead and make a reservation.

Our family took a short trip Monday and Tuesday. We went to Lake Eufaula. We were gone a little less than 30 hours and a little more than 6 of those hours were spent driving. There were four cars in our caravan totaling 16 people. No one had never been to where we went, but we all got there without having to stop to ask for directions. GPS is a wonderful thing. We did stop to go to the bathroom. On the way there, we stopped to eat sandwiches Ruth Ann had made. When we arrived at our destination, we had cabins waiting for us. We cooked food we had brought along. It rained early the next morning before anyone got up, but no one got wet. The cabins had air conditioning, so no one got hot. Traveling is relatively easy in our day.

That has not been the case for most of human history. To get from point A to point B in the ancient world, you often needed help along the way. Hospitality was greatly valued and routinely practiced.

When three strangers showed up at Abraham's door, he didn't ask for references. He didn't run a background check. He immediately provided what they might need or might want. He gave them water to wash their feet. He provided a cool place in the shade for them to rest. He provided a snack as they awaited a more sumptuous meal.

Abraham didn't know who he was entertaining, but he didn't need to know in order to show hospitality. Thousands of years later, the author of the NT letter Hebrews wrote, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (13:2). That is exactly what Abraham did, but Abraham hosted more than just angels. He showed hospitality to God Himself.

Did you know that you can show hospitality to God? That is what Jesus taught. He said that when we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, when we clothe the naked, or visit the sick and those in prison, we are ministering to God. When we fail to do those things, we fail to minister to Him. King Solomon wrote, "Whoever is generous to the poor lends to YHWH." He goes on to say that God "will repay him for his deed" (Proverbs 19:17).

As a friend of God, we are to welcome Him. We do that by showing welcome and hospitality to those who need it. We should look for creative ways to show God's love.

On our way back to Enid on Tuesday, we stopped in Tulsa for lunch. After lunch, Ruth Ann was thirsty for some coffee. Coffee happens to be her love language. She consulted her I-phone which directed us to a coffee shop a couple of miles away. It is a chain, but we had never heard of it before. It is called Not Your Average Joe. I think there is just be one in the Tulsa area, but there are a half dozen in OKC and one planned for Edmond. Each location intentionally hires special needs individuals. Their motto is, "Exceptional coffee. Even better people." They have hired more than 50 employees who have special needs.

The founder and executive of the non-profit that runs these coffee shops noted that after high school 80% of special needs people are either unemployed or under employed. He added, "Not Your Average Joe provides its employees more than a paycheck. They get customer-facing meaningful employment, opportunities for social engagement with customers and co-workers, and continuing education."

We show our friendship with God by blessing those who are made in His image. In addition to those with special needs, this would include widows, orphans, the incarcerated, the homeless, the sick and the dying, those struggling with addiction, the abused, and those with mental disorders. Regardless of whether people are on the fringes of our society or are found in the mainstream, the Church is to be the Body of Christ, showing His love and His care to all.

There is a second thing we do as a friend of God.

2. As God's Friend, We are to Believe Him.

When your friend tells you something, you believe him. When your friend tells you he caught a fish this big, you believe him until you hear him retell the story and the fish becomes thiiiis big. At that point, you can harbor some doubts.

When God tells us something, however, we believe Him, and we can always believe

Him. Our experience with God confirms that He is truthful. He tells it as it is. Some friends tell you what you want to hear. Our Friend in high places tells us what we need to know, and as His friend, we believe him.

Back in Genesis 15, God told Abram that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars. Abram believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. When we get to Genesis 17, God repeats the promise of a child with his wife. Now, Abraham is 99 and his wife is nearing 90. Look at Abraham's response this time. Notice what he does in v. 17.

Abraham laughs.

In chapter 18, someone else laughs at what seems to be a preposterous promise. Look at vv. 9-17. It appears that Sarah is eavesdropping on the conversation that is taking place between Abraham and the guests. When she heard it said that she was going to have a baby within a year's time, she covered her mouth and chuckled silently to herself. When confronted with what she had done, she compounded her error by denying it.

Almost 30 years ago I read a sermon on this passage by William Willimon, a Methodist minister. He remarked that there are two kinds of laughter. The first kind is a cynical laughter. We even use the phrase, "Don't make me laugh." We hear things that seem outlandish to us, and we laugh disbelieving such things might actually happen.

He recalled that in 1986 he attended a United Methodist General Conference. On the last day of the conference, they passed a resolution that said they were going to make 9 million new Methodists by 1994. At the time, the Methodist Church was losing 65,000 members every year.

When Willimon got home he wrote an article entitled, "My Dog the Methodist." He argued that there was no way they were going to make 9 million new Methodists unless they started baptizing dogs. He offered his mixed-breed terrier as a fit recipient. He wrote, "This dog, as far as I know has shown no interest in biblical studies. Therefore, it would make a perfect Methodist." He added, "This dog has the sexual ethics of some members of my former congregations."

Willimon laughed a cynical kind of laughter, and so did Abraham and so did Sarah.

There is a second kind of laughter. Willimon called it evangelical laughter. It is a laughter that comes as a gift because of what God has and is doing. When their son was born, he was given the name *Isaac*. That name means *laughter*. We read in Genesis 21:6, "And Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.'" The woman who should have been in the geriatric ward was transferred to the maternity ward.

The second kind of laughter is not the laughter of cynical disbelief. It is not the laughter that has to be muffled. No. This evangelical laughter is an outrageous joy that comes as a result of a God for whom nothing too difficult. This laughter is borne of a God who does the unexpected, the incredible.

In the fall of 1982, I surrendered to the ministry. I believed then, and I still believe, that God called me to preach. I said "yes" to the call. At the time I was a freshman at OBU. In January of the next year, some friends and I left the campus and drove to Del City to attend the Oklahoma Evangelism Conference. We heard some great preachers and

some great preaching. One of those evangelists was a man named Bill Stafford. When he was called to preach, he was afflicted with a stuttering problem. At the age of 19, he announced God had called him to preach, and some laughed. He went on to preach in some of the largest churches in America.

We look at what God has said, what God has called us to do, and then we look at who we are, and we wonder what we are to think and what we are to do.

Pastor Frank Pollard wrote:

How do we handle all these contradictions, inconsistencies, and opposites within us? All the promises of God that we believe majestically well up in us, and yet, so do all the human realities of life. How do we handle it? It seems that most do it by denying one or the other.

We must do better than that. Laughter is better than outright denial, but laughter is no substitute for real and full-fledged faith. Faith is that for which God is looking. Those who embrace with faith God and His promises are the ones God deems to be His friends.

As His friends, we are to welcome God, and we are to believe God. There is a third thing we are to do.

3. As God's Friend, We are to Obey Him.

Believing and obeying go hand-in-hand. We can't do the second until we have done the first. Obeying is built on the foundation of faith.

Some months ago, we finished our study of Hebrews. We spent much time in Hebrews 11. That is known as "the faith chapter." We examined the stories of men and women of the OT who had distinguished themselves by their faith. About 18 individuals are mentioned by name. Of those, no one gets more ink than Abraham. The author of Hebrews begins his recitation of Abraham's heroic deeds with the words, "By faith Abraham obeyed" (v. 8).

A friend of God obeys God, and he does so by faith.

The author of Hebrews also commended Sarah. We read in v. 11, "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful who had promised." Her cynical laughter was replaced by authentic faith, and her authentic faith led to authentic laughter, joyful laughter.

Here is the process: God speaks; we believe; God acts. Sarah went from cynical doubt to full belief. How did she get there? God asked her a question, "Is anything too hard for YHWH?"

That is a good question to ponder. When it seems as though your money is going to run out before the month does, ask yourself, "Is anything too hard for my God?"

God is more than able to care for us when we lose our strength, when we lose our hope, when we lose our patience, when we lose our temper, when we lose our composure. God has us and will hold us because nothing is too hard for God.

When God says, "Do this," and you are tempted to say, "I can't do that," pause and ask yourself, "Is anything too hard for God?" Once you have answered that, reply, "Yes,

God. With your help I can, and with your help I will.”

In John’s gospel, we read that after Jesus and His disciples observed the Passover meal and before He was arrested in the Garden, Jesus had a heart-to-heart conversation with His students. He said to them, “You are My friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). Our friendship with God is contingent on our obedience to God. We can’t claim to be friends with God if we dabble in discipleship, if we play at or just pretend to follow Him. One chapter earlier, Jesus said, “Whoever has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me (14:21). As a friend of Jesus, we love Jesus, and we show that love by obeying Him.

His name was Curtis Hamm, but he was known as Bob to his friends and Dr. Hamm to his students. I met him when I pastored on Grand Lake. He showed up several times to worship. When I became the pastor at FBC, Stillwater, he again came to worship a few times. He taught marketing in the business school at OSU for 30 years.

After he retired from teaching, I had an occasion to visit him. During that visit, he gave me a book he had written a few years earlier. It was entitled, *The Art of Partnering*. I came across it in my office this past Friday. I took it down and skimmed through it again.

In the conclusion to his book, Bob wrote:

Now that you have read my book, you have earned the right to know my secret. I have come to this conclusion after 30 years of university teaching and research all over the world [during his career Bob visited 138 countries]. I have searched for techniques, skills, and even philosophies for achieving goals and building strategic relationships . . . Both personally and professionally my life-long quest has been for the secret of happiness. If you will allow me, I would like to step out from behind the college lectern and sit with you on the couch . . .

Love is what makes businesses flourish and relationships with constituents last. Love is what makes marriages sweet and athletic teams champions. Love is what makes military units march in unison and churches sing with harmony. Love is what makes students want to learn from a caring teacher. It is the secret to a full lung of air and a quiet smile as we fall asleep. Goals, money, success—these are all noble pursuits of our lives, but what we live for is love.

Friendship with God is all about love. Love Him, and you will welcome Him in all of His strange disguises. Love Him, and you will believe Him when He speaks. Love Him, and you will obey Him when He directs you. The need of the day and everyday is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.