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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH
ELKHORN NEBRASKA
APRIL 20, 2008
PASTOR LOWELL NELSON

1 PASTOR NELSON: I come to bring you words of
2 encouragement. I want to thank Mark and Michelle for giving
3 a quarterly report. Thanks for being here in worship.

4 I hope I can do justice to the text. I hope you
5 brought your Bibles.

6 What I'm going to do today, with God's help, I would
7 ask you to turn to First Samuel, which is in the Old
8 Testament, in my Bible it's page 266, so it's in the front
9 part of the Bible, First Samuel, Chapter 18.

10 We are going to do a Bible study about friendship,
11 and in that friendship I want to draw some parallels to our
12 relationship with God and our relationship in stewardship.

13 So for guests that are here, or for new friends, I
14 hope you enjoy the tracking of that.

15 And for members here being called out in a
16 supportive way, I hope that it's inspirational to you.

17 First Samuel, to give you a quick context of that,
18 Chapter 18, you know of David, or many of you have heard of
19 David, he gets a new friend named Jonathan, and this
20 friendship is a model for life together, because it's real.

21 So would you read with me? First Samuel, Chapter
22 18, and I'm going to read just the first five verses.

23 "When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul
24 of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David and Jonathan loved
25 him as his own soul.

1 "Saul took him that day and would not let him return
2 to his father's house.

3 "Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because
4 he loved him as his own soul.

5 "Jonathan stripped himself of the robe he was
6 wearing and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his
7 sword and his bow and his belt.

8 "David went out and was successful wherever Saul
9 sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army, and all
10 the people, even the servants of Saul, approved."

11 Please keep your Bible open to that verse.

12 One of the goals that I have as a pastor here is to
13 make sure that the basics are covered.

14 The basics in this is that when you use language
15 such as Jonathan was bound to the soul, and Jonathan loved
16 him as his own soul, that reminds me of how life is in this
17 century.

18 Many of our relationships are pretty superficial.
19 How many of you have deep friends that you think they know
20 your soul?

21 How many of you share your soul with your friends?
22 Many of you are doing better than me.

23 My life is one where I play it safe sometimes, but
24 this model from the scriptures in the Old Testament, roughly
25 three thousand years ago, talks about what it means to be a

1 disciple of God, which it means to be real, to not play it
2 safe.

3 He gave everything, and for the rest of my life I
4 want to give it all, I don't want to play it safe anymore and
5 keep it in reserve, and that is a gospel message that I want
6 you to know.

7 Pastor Mark had fun with taking RISE, Real
8 Involvement Satisfies Everyone. I like that, so I have a
9 surprise for him.

10 I took REAL, which is the first slide, Real
11 Involvement Satisfies Everyone, and it tested well in our
12 focus group at the first service, so we'll see how it does
13 here, so we are talking about being real.

14 Remember, the sermon last week talked about many of
15 us look at the outside of people, especially when we are
16 looking at leaders, but God looks at the inside, looks at the
17 heart.

18 That's about being real, and REAL here is
19 Relationships Express Authentic Love.

20 Am I still employed? (Laughter) That's good.
21 Relationships Express Authentic Love.

22 That came to me last night. I was trying to figure
23 out a fun way of making sense of what it means to be real,
24 because I'm going to take a friendship between two people in
25 the Bible and use it as a way that we can understand our

1 relationship with God in our stewardship life.

2 And it's in relationships. Our God is a God of
3 relationships, and the word that is used for that is
4 covenant.

5 Covenant is a word that -- historically you go, have
6 I made many covenants?

7 But it means a promise, a promise that's deeper than
8 just the kind of nice and here is how it's going to go.

9 It's a promise that has love involved. It is
10 something that supersedes what would be considered normal.

11 It's basically taking words and putting them into
12 action. Faith in action.

13 And covenants are interesting. If you look in the
14 Old Testament you start seeing many of them.

15 You see that language here in those verses that
16 David and Jonathan, Jonathan made a covenant with him,
17 because he loved him.

18 Covenant is a word that I'll translate right now
19 into words like marriage.

20 We still do marriage covenants, and our success in
21 that in this society is a little suspect, isn't it? It's
22 difficult to keep.

23 We make covenants in mortgages, and you know the
24 news now that many people aren't keeping their covenants, and
25 we won't just blame people that borrowed, and the people that

1 lent them money, didn't have an authentic relationship, and
2 people are backtracking on that.

3 I tease a little bit about the covenant that we have
4 when we get our driver's license.

5 I thought that red light means stop. It appears to
6 me some people don't share that same covenant with me and
7 think that red light means red light, plus five seconds or
8 something means stop.

9 But we have a covenant in the way that we drive, and
10 we have covenants on little things, so for our younger
11 friends here, on going to school, or doing your homework, or
12 brushing your teeth when your parents are not watching, we
13 make promises all the time.

14 But the thing that is so amazing about life together
15 is that we have a God of promise, of anything that we have,
16 is God's relationship with us is one of promise.

17 It's a promise of life. Life now and life in the
18 future.

19 And those type of promises, the covenants that he
20 has made with us, give us meaning, how we can look back at
21 our own history, and give us a goal in the future.

22 The first service, sometimes it's wrongly lampooned
23 as being more conservative, it isn't, it's a great group of
24 people, and I was teasing them, made it interactive, had a
25 little interactive time in there, what is the promise that

1 God has given to us that was just re-amplified right here
2 during baptism, which is we'll never be alone.

3 God is with his precious daughter. God is with us.
4 We, through God's covenant, through Jesus Christ's life,
5 death and resurrection, we will never be alone.

6 We have eternal life, and so in that we are free and
7 I want to keep emphasizing that message.

8 A promise, a covenant, creates identity, and so what
9 I mean by that is when you make a promise you're saying
10 something about yourself, and that's important this day and
11 age.

12 To actually hold a position of something, from what
13 I can tell, is kind of radical.

14 I think the right thing you are supposed to say to
15 people is that's your reality, here is my reality, both are
16 equally valid.

17 I don't believe that. That's my reality. I also
18 think it's more real, which is there are actions that we take
19 that create identity.

20 And as I lead into a little bit more unpacking of
21 what happened with Jonathan and David, the biggest thing I
22 see about promises is it gives us shape and form when life
23 buffets us.

24 I don't know if you've noticed, I'm just picking up
25 a subtle little message in the media, have you noticed a

1 message that the economy is getting worse?

2 I saw USA Today and they had a big record recession,
3 and I saw TV stuff, and I try to go on a media fast so I'm
4 not overly depressed by that, but there are things that are
5 going to buffet our world.

6 And promises help us create a form that keeps us
7 true, not perfect, we make mistakes, we get off track, but it
8 gives us the form to know how to get back in alignment with
9 God.

10 This type of friendship between Jonathan and David
11 is one that does that.

12 Now, you may know, and if you have time this week,
13 which I hope you do, is to take a look at Chapters 18, 19 and
14 20, because it shares the story in more detail.

15 But basically David was doing all the right things.
16 David was a good person.

17 David was a person that was protecting Israel
18 against their enemies.

19 David was a person that helped Saul, and for that he
20 had six attempts on his life from the king, Saul, six of
21 them.

22 Three of them were when Saul became so upset that he
23 threw his javelin at him.

24 Twice were when Saul tried to set him up to go into
25 battle so that he could get a wife from the king, which of

1 course would be a power play also, besides the love, but to
2 do it, to fight and be killed in battle.

3 And then once Saul actually sent a hit squad. None
4 of those panned out.

5 But my point to you is, if you want duress in a
6 friendship, that's duress.

7 You may not know when Jonathan gave his robe how
8 significant that was.

9 Jonathan was the eldest son of Saul. He's next in
10 line to be king. He's going to be king.

11 And yet he was able to discern from God's help that
12 David was to be king and gave it all up.

13 Now that's friendship. Rare is that type of
14 friendship.

15 But it's in the Old Testament, Leviticus, love your
16 neighbor as yourself.

17 And in Mark it's the second most important
18 commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself.

19 The only one more important is love God with all
20 your heart and soul.

21 So in giving that, I'm just so impressed by what
22 Jonathan can do in friendship.

23 This mutual friendship has a word in the Hebrew,
24 it's called hesed, H-E-S-E-D, and I love this word because it
25 can be translated into loving kindness.

1 But from what I can tell of our Hebrew friends,
2 their words have more power than loving kindness. You can
3 translate that into more verbs.

4 It can be translated like this. Our covenant, our
5 friendship, is loving kindness, and what does that mean?

6 It means it's consistent, it's ever faithful, it's
7 relentless, it's constantly pursuing, it's lavish, it's
8 extravagant, it's unrestrained, it's furious love.

9 And we have a new word for that now. We call that
10 grace.

11 We call that grace, of what comes through our
12 relationship with God, and what God has done for us.

13 So as I start building this bridge, you can see the
14 love of friends parallels the love that we have with our Lord
15 and Savior.

16 Their friendship and their covenant to be with each
17 other is so touching because it lasts a long time. They
18 reaffirm it.

19 And at the end of today's service I'm going to ask
20 that we reaffirm our covenant with God.

21 It will be light, it will be enjoyable, but it's
22 time, because we need to constantly do that.

23 We do it through our communion service and our
24 baptism, but we need to claim it.

25 Their friendship, when they recommitted to each

1 other, it contained the evil. It was awesome.

2 The friendship took what was common and turned it
3 into something holy.

4 And we get to see that here throughout the month
5 when we take water and it becomes holy because of word and
6 action.

7 And we take bread and we take wine and it turns into
8 something holy, because in word and action it does that.

9 But friendships turn life into something holy. It's
10 highly unlikely that David would have been king without that
11 type of friendship.

12 Jonathan discerned that God was in David and no
13 matter what he kept that type of relationship.

14 And I asked Sabrina to show a simple slide that
15 shows that.

16 Here is a highway sign. Remember our covenant we
17 have on red lights, I want to reemphasize that, when you're
18 out.

19 The first arrow I wanted to show was the type of
20 arrow that comes when somebody listens to you.

21 When somebody loves you so deeply that they can
22 drill down into you.

23 Eugene Peterson wrote about it in a powerful way.
24 If you ever have to guess about devotional material and
25 you're in the book store and you want something to stimulate

1 you, buy Eugene Peterson, I don't care which book it is, it's
2 good, and we wrote this about friends.

3 "A friend is someone who enters our life, who isn't
4 looking for someone to use, and is leisurely and takes time
5 to find out what is really going on in us and is secure
6 enough to never exploit our weaknesses or attack our
7 strengths.

8 "They recognize our inner life and understand how
9 difficult it is to live with convictions. They confirm what
10 is deepest within us."

11 That's the type of friendship that Jonathan and
12 David had.

13 The next arrow that goes up is then we're able to be
14 who we are meant to be.

15 When somebody really understands us, and isn't just
16 trying to bracket us by age, or income, or employment, by
17 what we've done or what we've left undone, and when they take
18 that time, we're free to be ourselves and respond, and out of
19 that friendship that they had David became king.

20 And I don't know how history would have been if
21 David would not have been king.

22 I shudder to think, but I'm pleased to know that God
23 was in control of that friendship and was able to bless that.

24 So the depth that comes down frees us up to be who
25 we want to be.

1 Two more slides are that no matter which ways the
2 winds buffet, whether it's something totally unexpected, or
3 the next one, it's something that you fear and it's coming,
4 no matter what it is, it can't be overwhelmed by what is
5 together, and that's what the friendship is here, because it
6 was real.

7 And in that the relationships express authentic love
8 and life was changed.

9 I'm going to ask you to go to the next one, we will
10 free it up again, and now you will see a seamless transition
11 to stewardship.

12 I want to encourage you in your stewardship message,
13 Michelle and Mark spoke about it, but I'm here also to help
14 you understand that our stewardship life is one of friendship
15 and deep relationship with God.

16 God is someone who loves us, never seeks to exploit
17 us, spends the time with us, loves us with grace, furious,
18 glorious, extravagantly, grace.

19 And so, Sabrina, if you can show that, when Mark and
20 I talk about theology, and we talk about up and in and out,
21 we talk about a relationship with God and with each other and
22 out to the world, I have a slight little point I want to keep
23 bringing up.

24 The first thing to understand about time up with God
25 is that God makes the move down first. Our move is one of

1 receiving the gifts of God.

2 It's an awesome understanding. It frees us up,
3 because God is making that move.

4 We don't have to try to make that move and that's
5 good news.

6 And so in that, in this life that we have, is that
7 God loves us so much, as the next arrow shows, that we're
8 free to be ourselves, to respond.

9 Because the next arrow is life itself is going to
10 buffet us.

11 How much it costs to fill up a tank of gas these
12 days, taxes, fear, very legitimate economic restructuring
13 issues, global economy, they're coming.

14 Things that you know in your own life that are
15 coming are going to buffet you.

16 But the covenant that we have, the relationship with
17 God, that God makes first and we respond to, allows us to
18 form our life up, by going down from God and back up and
19 respond, and no matter what happens, we can then be free.

20 So my encouragement to you is when you hear
21 messages, and perhaps you're a person that has been giving
22 faithfully, you've been on track, we would say you're right
23 where you should be, thank God.

24 Keep understanding the power of the relationship
25 between God and yourself, because something is going to come

1 and rock your world.

2 That's just a fact, but thank God that you have that
3 alignment.

4 And for the rest of us that are struggling on how to
5 give consistently in the midst of all the messiness that life
6 is, it's a call back, it's a come back, come back to
7 alignment, to understand that God has given everything for
8 you, and now you're freed up to give back.

9 Some of you know I'm a recovering executive, and
10 recovering I mean in that sense I'm used to command and
11 control.

12 Mark and I and Wenda, we were just talking about
13 this, and I would think you would know me this way.

14 I look at the financials and I kind of see they are
15 out of alignment, right, and I saw that about the first week
16 of January.

17 I'm kind of going, okay, God, let's see if it gets
18 back.

19 I told Wenda, I come in, she may worry about
20 worship, and I'm worried about stewardship, between the two
21 of us we worry a lot, not about the same things, we just
22 realized it's time to come back to God when we worry.

23 And on this, my old way would have been to write a
24 note to everybody that is behind in their pledge and just go,
25 buck it up.

1 I mean, do you need the numbers in bigger font?
2 Here's this number, here is this number, negative number in
3 brackets, does anybody need support on that?

4 But as God continues to work on my heart, I come to
5 say to you that's a great time to reestablish a covenant with
6 God and just go, God, thank you for my life, and thank you
7 again, I got off track, I don't give because I was scared, I
8 got off track because there were unexpected things that came
9 on, or there were life changes.

10 Great, I can come back, be encouraged, and Pastor
11 Mark spoke to all of us when he said either people that have
12 pledged, or people that don't pledge, I just know this about
13 pledging, is that it's a form of covenant, and in the midst
14 of things it helps you keep form.

15 So that is what my message is to you. When you hear
16 that we're off track financially, it's a time to get back on
17 track. It's a time to re-understand the covenant.

18 It's not the conditions that carry the day; it's the
19 promises. It's the promises that carry our day.

20 Bethany is a vehicle for serving God's purposes.
21 Once in a while we'll talk about the budget we have, give to
22 the budget.

23 The budget is the method we use to keep track of
24 things, but we're giving to God.

25 And for some of you who have been in church a long

1 time, sometimes it's not well understood. We think we are
2 giving to a budget.

3 But I want to reestablish that, as best as we can as
4 human beings, the missional goals we set for this year are
5 God's goals for us to follow; not our goals for God.

6 We are going to be aligned to that. We need to know
7 if we are going to be on track with giving soon, because if
8 we don't, we'll start making some decisions that are going to
9 impact this church.

10 And some of us, I'm not overly concerned in that
11 traditional regard, like watch if I'm scared, no, I just mean
12 that we've made a covenant, and Mark picked up on it, we have
13 a relationship now on this cross that is, by these arrows, is
14 a way of relationship here, but we've also established a
15 relationship out in the world.

16 And I don't want to give up on what we have
17 covenanted the give into the world.

18 I want us to understand God's love enough that we
19 are not going to cut and give back the old way of saying,
20 well, we don't have enough to share. That's not true. We do
21 have enough.

22 This commitment, benevolence, the investment in
23 children and youth, development of a whole life stewardship,
24 Heart of the Matter campaign, life groups, worship concerts,
25 all those were something that unite us.

1 That is our covenant with God for this year. God,
2 with your help, that's what we are going to do, because you
3 blessed us, this is how we best discern.

4 So if you ever get in that cynical mood where you go
5 it's just a budget, it's just stuff, it's more than that.

6 If it isn't for you, then I would love to talk to
7 you, as best as I can encourage you to reject that way of the
8 world and step back into alignment.

9 Bethany is the vehicle for serving God's purposes.
10 So Mark has made a point of this, did you bring your Bible?

11 Mark is also Wenda's support, are you a member of a
12 life group?

13 And I want to encourage you today, are you living
14 the life? Are you living this life?

15 And when we get off track, that's why we're here, is
16 to help you get back on track.

17 That's what our purpose is. When we get off track,
18 that's how you help us live this life, because this is, this
19 directional sign, is the life for us.

20 It's a life of unique friendship with God; that
21 God's majestic love for us allows us to be touched at the
22 core and respond.

23 No matter what buffets us, whether it's life or
24 death itself, we know the promise he has made, and that
25 promise is true.

1 In this message I've attempted to show that the
2 relationships that Jonathan and David had are a great way to
3 live your life.

4 Don't play it safe. If you've played it safe with
5 your spouse, or with your children, or with your friends,
6 it's time to get real, and be real expressing your love for
7 people, authentically, real love, because life is short.

8 I was in the hospital yesterday visiting someone
9 that is nearing the end of their life and it just hit me so
10 much.

11 Life is short, it's a fantastic life, but life is
12 short.

13 So if you are going to be real sometime later, my
14 encouragement is to be real today.

15 Understand it's a life together, so you're not
16 alone.

17 So Michelle offered that up. If something has
18 changed in your life, or something is going on, we want to
19 help you. That's what this is all about.

20 I had teased some friends that we often get to hear,
21 and I'm glad we do, when something is going off in someone's
22 life, something has buffeted them off.

23 I teased one of my friends and I said I just never
24 get to hear about the unexpected \$25,000 bonus that came
25 through.

1 Somehow somebody doesn't e-mail me that as much, and
2 you didn't laugh too much about that yourself, but somehow
3 it's about all of us, because some of us are hurting.

4 And so for some of us that have reserves, or have
5 been blessed financially, or have that ability, maybe we can
6 step up also.

7 That's how God's economy works, because otherwise we
8 hunker in the bunker, and life is not meant to be lived that
9 way.

10 That battle has already been fought. In this sign
11 is encouragement to you.

12 My sense of humor is, is that enough? Do you need
13 some more?

14 The reason I tease about that is because I wanted to
15 close with strength and I want to be able to do the response,
16 if that's okay with you.

17 I invite you to be real. That's what this is all
18 about. Jonathan and David are real, and the future was
19 changed because of that.

20 God has committed in you unbelievable things,
21 reality in ways that we can't even understand.

22 And so I'm going to ask that as the musicians come
23 back now, I am going to ask that you stand.

24 Would you please stand? I'm going to ask that you
25 join with me in a prayer.

1 God, I ask you now, we're looking at a sign, we want
2 this to be the direction for our life.

3 Sometimes we scarcely can believe how you have come
4 into our life through the gift of your son Jesus Christ; that
5 you are always for us.

6 That simple arrow down is truth itself and, God,
7 help us to reaffirm your commitment to us by living real in
8 all that we do.

9 God, no matter what buffets us from the left or the
10 right, no matter what challenges us, if we're off track, help
11 us come back into alignment with you.

12 God, I ask you now to bless the music as we lift up
13 to you that "Better Is One Day With You" because of the
14 extravagant grace in which you are present with us.

15 God, help us be encouraged, help us by the end of
16 this month, by the end of April, that we're getting back on
17 track with you, that we're ridding ourselves of fears, and
18 re-anchoring.

19 And now, congregation, I ask you to say a simple
20 prayer with me, and it goes like this.

21 God, I recommit myself to you.

22 I would like it just one more time and let's do it
23 together with strength.

24 God I recommit myself to you. God, thank you for
25 committing everything to us. Amen.