

## AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP

*Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel. Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father, and do not go to your brother's house when disaster strikes you -- better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away. Proverbs 27:9-10*

We were unlikely candidates for friendship from the very beginning. He was a well-known denominational representative and I was the pastor of a small, rural congregation. He was closer to my father's age than mine. He had pastored large, respected congregations and I was the pastor of the smallest church in the smallest Association in a forgotten corner of the state.

Bob came to lead a retreat for the pastors in our Association on the subject of Spiritual Awakening. I had very little exposure to the subject but I went to every pastor's meeting on the calendar. I would like to say it demonstrated my commitment to ministry but in reality I needed the fellowship and encouragement.

The retreat was held at a very rustic conference center setting in Masterson, Texas, a town that no longer exists. Sleeping arrangements consisted of bunk beds in a large dormitory room. After the evening session, Bob and I began to talk. First about acquaintances we had in common (Bob knows everybody). Then we shared experiences. He was a great encouragement to a young pastor trying to survive in unfamiliar surroundings.

Before the conference was over, I invited Bob to come and teach the material to our small congregation. We choose a date and I returned home to promote the event in our church.

As with all such conferences, the response was not everything I had hoped. As I recall, we had good attendance and folks enjoyed the teaching. However, we did not experience spiritual awakening. Bob stayed in our home and I felt privileged to be his host.

Our next contact came when I called to get a recommendation for someone to preach a revival. He introduced me to Jan who has also become a close friend. Bob and I kept in touch with occasional phone calls but we did not see each other very often.

One afternoon I received a most unexpected phone call. Bob was trying to write a sequel for the spiritual awakening seminar using the Model Prayer of Jesus as an outline. He needed some help. Our mutual friend, Jan, suggested he call me since I had done some in-depth study on that passage of scripture. If I was willing, he would send the material he had put together and I could develop it into a seminar.

At first, I was overwhelmed by his confidence and then frightened by the awesome task. I agreed because I had been trying to break into the writing business. Over the next few months I spent many hours working and reworking the material. Bob and I communicated often and it was finally ready to test.

He set up a conference with some very well known pastors and made plans for me to teach the material. I did not have enough sense to be intimidated. For two days I presented the seminar that I had written with all the confidence of a seminary professor. It was well received and sent to the printer.

The prayer seminar was the first of many projects that united Bob and me. Working together we have produced books, seminars, programs and a myriad of other resources for pastors and churches. However, the most valuable consequence of our partnership has not been the printed material but our friendship.

If a friend is someone who is there when you need them then Bob is the best friend I have. He is now my boss as well as my friend. I hesitated taking the job out of fear that our relationship would change. He assured me that it would not and he was correct. We have a unique relationship as employer and employee as well as friends.

I have become well-known and highly respected, not as much for what I have accomplished, but because of my friendship with Bob. Recently, a pastor told me that when I get to heaven I should first thank God for sending His Son to save me and then thank him for a friend like Bob. He was right.

Bob and I are still as different as night and day. He is a meticulous dresser, gives attention to minute details, and likes to plan everything in advance. My idea of being well-dressed is to have all the important parts covered. I see the big picture, not the minutiae, and planning is what you do on the way to an event.

Yet, instead of straining our relationship, our differences have actually strengthened our friendship. We agree on all the big decisions and we know how each other thinks. He trusts me to make decisions and listens when my opinion differs.

I am always quick to hear and heed his advice and ready to defend his actions if they are ever called into question. I have done things that I did not want to do, simply because he asked. Friends make life richer. They are worth the investment of time and effort because it will pay dividends.

As an independent person, I have never really needed a lot of friends. I do not require a lot of people in my life and do not mind spending time alone. However, I am very much aware of the necessity of having someone that I can always depend on. It is one of the greatest gifts in life. I hope that I can always be someone's friend.