

I. Introduction

A. (A story of spiritual companionship)

About 16 years ago I was pastoring a nice little Mennonite church in central Kansas but I was starting to feel a little restless there in my first pastorate. I wasn't burned out as a pastor, but I feared that in a few more years I might be. I was beginning to wonder if I had taken that congregation about as far as I could take them, without doing damage to my own passion for ministry or even damage to my emotional life and my family life. In short, I was wondering if it was time to move on to pastor somewhere else.

I also began to notice I was having a harder time sticking with my early morning prayer and devotions time. It was a spiritually difficult time for me. This larger vocational question of my calling to that particular church was not separated from my personal spiritual life. When you feel in a confused, transitional time it's not just your own spiritual disciplines that can suffer. Your very ability to see God at work can become murky. Your ability to recognize the voice of God speaking can evaporate.

Now, I also trust that you might understand ... such a time felt very lonely for me as a pastor. After all, who is the pastor's pastor? Even with some close friends in the congregation, I couldn't go to them to share these spiritual struggles. Doing that would have just unleashed fear and anxiety in the church and it would have undermined my active ministry. ... I don't share this today to get your pity for me or for the life of a pastor. We have seminaries and district conferences who provide us pastors with helpful resources to take care of ourselves for the long haul.

I'm grateful I can say that at that time I was already making use of such resources. Every six weeks or so I would drive about 45 minutes to see my spiritual director at his house. Phil is a gentle caring Catholic layman with specific training in spiritual direction. I got his name from an online listing of qualified spiritual directors. I recall him as an excellent non-judgmental listener. He often asked me about where God was in the activities of my life, or he helped me see unrecognized thoughts and feelings that colored my view of God.

As my spiritual director, Phil never outright told me what to believe or do. He didn't solve my problems and he wasn't there to give me answers. Sometimes I did come away from those spiritual direction visits with new insights or helpful practices. But many times I valued those visits just because he was there to hear me out, because I knew I wasn't alone in my struggles, and because he prayed specifically for me.

B. Today our featured faith practice is spiritual companionship

1. Some of you have a lot of experience with spiritual companionship and some of you are scratching your heads at these words that sound rather intimate and maybe a little threatening

- a) You may be wondering, "Who would be my spiritual friend or spiritual companion?" My spouse? Mom or Dad? My best friend?
- b) If you're not sure what that phrase means, then the subtitle for this Sunday is probably helpful – "walking together"
- c) Just as God created us to live in community for our own physical and emotional benefit, God did not intend our human life of faith and communion with God to be lived out in permanent solitude

(1) In our Christian lives, we need guides and peers with whom we can speak the sometimes stumbling language of our faith.

(2) We need fellow pilgrims with whom we can learn together on the journey. (Leader, "Practicing Faith" worship resources, Summer 2018, p46)

- 2. This morning I want to give us a few glimpses from the Bible of some people who were spiritual companions to each other
- 3. Then I want to introduce us a little more specifically to what a spiritual companionship relationship looks like, and the variety of forms and situations where it can play out

II. Some spiritual companions in the Bible

A. We heard from the book of Ruth a small segment of that story, where Naomi leaves her 2 Moabite daughters-in-law so she can try to scratch out a living among her own Israelite people

- 1. Ruth clings to her mother-in-law and stubbornly casts her lot with her, even going to live in a new land and embracing a new religion
- 2. There are a few obvious similarities & differences between them:
 - a) They're both widows, to start with, & economically vulnerable
 - b) They're clearly mother-in-law & daughter-in-law to each other ... there is a family bond, but there's also a generational difference in the respect and authority that each one is due
 - c) Despite being family, these women are ethnically & culturally very different. They were raised with very different languages, values and religions. If Ruth goes with Naomi, she will have to accept the life of an outsider
- 3. But beyond these external similarities and differences, Naomi and Ruth are fundamentally survival partners ... call them soul sisters
 - a) Their lot is thrown in with each other ... they will either survive together or die together. As such, they relate more as peers, even as sisters
 - b) Sometimes peers are the best spiritual friends: people who have walked similar paths and shared common experiences of struggle

B. In this NT letter written by the Apostle Paul, we also glimpsed a special relationship between him and his protégé Timothy

1. Paul is in a Roman prison, awaiting trial and probable execution, while Timothy carries on the ministry in churches which Paul started

a) What is the Paul & Timothy relationship like?

(1) Paul is clearly trying to pass on the legacy of his own teachings and modeling to his spiritual heir

(2) In simple terms, we could describe their relationship in dualities: It was like father/son ... elder/youth ... mentor/mentee

b) Most of all, we can describe Paul & Timothy's relationship as warm & affectionate ... they know each other well

(1) Paul calls him "beloved" and a "loyal son", a servant of God who has labored hard with Paul for the gospel

(2) This relationship is both functional ... and affectionate

2. As his own death is approaching and Paul ponders the future of the gospel he has worked so hard to spread, he treats Timothy more like a brother in the Lord ... the one to whom he's passing the torch

C. So we have here a few biblical examples of spiritual companions ... of relationships w/ a clear spiritual component

III. But what about us in our spiritual lives today?

A. What might spiritual companionship look like in our lives?

1. Some of you probably have some questions or trouble envisioning yourself in a spiritual companionship relationship

a) You may be thinking, *"I have plenty of relationships already. I don't really want to start a new relationship like this from scratch"*

b) Or you may wonder, *"This might feel a little weird with the people I already know. How close of friends do we have to be?"*

c) For some of you the issue may be, *"This just sounds too scary to me. I'm not used to talking about my own spiritual life."*

2. I want to first name the variety of situations where spiritual companionship can happen ... and then I'll close by describing what makes a spiritual companionship relationship

B. There's actually quite a variety of contexts or settings that can bring people together as spiritual companions

1. Sometimes the most obvious place to look is your best friend ...

- a) Is there a friend you just "click with", and you share a common faith? So why not take those conversations a little deeper?

2. Sometimes it's kinship/family ties, as with Naomi & Ruth

- a) I've heard of blood sisters or even adult parent-child relationships where there's a deep spiritual sharing, a relationship not just based on family roles
- b) I've also heard of spouses who are spiritual companions to each other.
- (1) I say I've heard of it ... but in my life experience as a husband AND as a pastor, I think it's rare
 - (2) It's rare because the "nitty-gritty & very unpretty" realities of marriage that we have to deal with sometimes ... they just muddy our ability to listen well to the deeply personal spiritual stuff our spouse is trying to express.
 - (3) Most of the time we are better served by having someone other than a spouse as our spiritual companion

3. Spiritual friendship may arise out of people who have different roles in a common group or mission, e.g.

- a) Paul & Timothy worked together on their missionary trips, but they had very different roles and responsibilities, so they weren't exactly peers
- b) These spiritual friends could be others at your workplace, or they could simply be people who you met through your congregation or a Sunday School class

I remember a time in my senior year in high school when I was very active in my church's MYF. For maybe 8 months that year our youth pastor and 3 of us guys from the MYF would meet weekly at 6:30 in the morning at the local donut shop before we went to school. The purpose was to catch up on our lives, our joys and our worries, and then pray together.

4. You may find that a spiritual friendship arises organically in your life ... perhaps with someone you met in a college class or at a conference somewhere. They may not be your BFF but you quickly jumped to a level of spiritual depth and kindred spirits where you saw a possibility that would nurture your soul

5. And of course you may seek out a formal arrangement of spiritual direction as I began when I was in seminary & continued in my 2 pastorates, with someone outside of my congregation

- a) This is most often a paid spiritual director whom we voluntarily seek out, usually based on the recommendation of a friend or their inclusion in a database of trained spiritual directors
- b) I invite you to contact one of us pastors if you're interested in finding a spiritual director but don't know where to look

IV. So what makes it a spiritual companioning relationship?

A. Let's start with what a spiritual companion relationship is NOT

1. Coincidental: Just because 2 people are friends and they're both Christians doesn't make that relationship a "spiritual friendship"
2. Not just for chit chat, or commenting on what's happening in church, or at work, or in sports or politics
3. Not meant to be a Bible Study or a counseling session, although some aspects of that may come up
4. Also is not a manipulation or power exercise by someone who needs to influence or control others

B. Here are some characteristics of a spiritual companion relationship, arranged to make it easier to remember. When you think of a spiritual friendship, think of going D.E.E.P.E.R.

1. Divinity language

- a) This is the foundation that sets this relationship apart from so many other relationships. It's a relationship where God-talk is not off limits and it is in fact natural and expected
- b) In so many settings we Xians get together these days but we don't mention God and we act as if God is irrelevant ...
 - (1) in other words it's basically a secular gathering by people who happen to be Christians
 - (2) There is a place for that, and we don't have to be pious and sound holy all the time, but something is wrong if we never talk about God and our own spiritual lives with any other person!
- c) It's a spiritual friendship BECAUSE we acknowledge what God is (or is not) doing, & we actually speak to God in the presence of someone else

2. Encourage each other

- a) This is all about encouragement. If it's not encouraging you in your Christian walk, then it's not worth it
- b) If you try out a spiritual friendship with someone or if you explore meeting with a paid spiritual director and it gives you no encouragement at all, then gracefully drop it and try meeting with someone else!
- c) One of the biggest gifts of a spiritual friendship is when someone else is a mouthpiece to you for the love of God ... a conduit for the grace of God

3. Exhort each other

- a) In case you think spiritual friendships are always about "talking nice" and about always making the other person feel good, THINK AGAIN!
- b) Listen to a few words about Christian living, coming from Ephesians chapter 4, and listen how Paul in short order covers both encouragement and exhortation (*read Eph. 4:25-6, 29*)
- c) Sometimes in our spiritual friendships we need to gently, humbly help our friend consider how sin may be distorting something in their life, just as we must be open to the same truth spoken in love to us

4. Pray with and for each other

- a) As helpful as your relationship with your spiritual friend may be, neither of you has all the wisdom or resources that each other needs. Only the Spirit of God can help you take those next steps bringing you closer to God!
- b) There is great power in praying together with someone, and even greater power felt when you hear someone else praying to God specifically for you and your spiritual needs.

5. Expect hard questions

- a) If this is sanitized conversation with only "Sunday School" answers, then you're not being spiritual friends with each other
- b) Allow your friend to express any anger or disappointment they have toward God, and take the risk to name the fact that you sometimes doubt God's presence or God's power! What I'm saying is, "Keep it real"!

6. Respect confidences

- a) This isn't the intimacy that spouses share, but some of the most deeply personal parts of a person's life are shared when we speak honestly about our own life with God.
- b) I urge you to honor that sacred word by agreeing to only share with someone else what you've heard, with your spiritual friend's permission

V. (Application)

A. Here in North America, we tend to keep our spiritual beliefs to ourselves ... private and personal

1. As Christians we appropriately emphasize that each person must make their own decision to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
2. In this worship series, some of these practices can be done with or at the same time as other people (such as fasting, or Bible study).

- a) But all of them are things you can do on your own and by yourself ... all except for one: THIS ONE
- b) Spiritual companionship is the only practice we're emphasizing that you cannot do by yourself, because by its nature it requires engaging with someone else.

B. No one can require you to do any of these practices, but we pastors are encouraging you to at least try all of them

1. Recall bookmarks from last week, located on the table in the foyer to check off your participation

- a) Also you're invited to tie colored ribbons on the ropes near the center aisle in the back, a ribbon for each of the weekly practices that you have actually done
- b) The colors correspond to the color of each practice on the bookmarks, so today is purple for fasting and next week will add orange for spiritual companionship

2. Many of you already do some form of spiritual companioning, perhaps with a good friend, or with someone from this church, or more formalized with a spiritual director

3. But for others this may seem like a foreign or even a scary prospect. We recognize that a high proportion of Waterford people are in a Sunday School class or small group

- a) That's why we're inviting all adult Sunday School classes and small groups to deliberately experiment with something for at least a month:
- b) We ask you to see if people in your class or group would commit to trying out spiritual friendship by meeting weekly with someone you already know, and do it for at least a month
- c) You don't need to meet with food and it doesn't need to be for a whole hour. Simply talk about what's happening in your relationship with God (good or bad), hear and support each other, and pray together
- d) This tends to work best in pairs but it could be more than two, if that feels easier for you. Any more than 3 or 4 persons and you don't have enough time to share honestly.

4. And if you're not in a Sunday School class or small group, finding a spiritual friend is still possible.

- a) I encourage you to think about someone who's a good friend already and who is also a Christian, but w/ whom you're not in the habit of such spiritual conversations.
- b) Take the risk to ask that friend about trying this experiment with you, as a way to potentially strengthen faith for both of you

VI. Conclusion

A. Friends, we are called to be disciples of Christ, not just believers. And we grow as disciples by engaging in spiritual practices

B. I invite you today not only to make room for God in your life through fasting, as Terry preached last Sunday, but to go DEEPER by walking with others in spiritual companionship