

Who's Got the Chute?

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 *John 18:12-27*

We've all heard the story of the three people flying in a plane – a Nobel Prize winner, the Pope and a Boy Scout. And sure enough there's trouble with the engines and the pilot appears in the cabin looking quite desperate with a parachute already on his back. And he yells that the engines are gone and there's no hope and there's only three parachutes and I've got one of them and Goodbye. Out the door he goes. Two parachutes left, three people. The Nobel Prize winner says to the other two, "Listen, I just won the Nobel Prize so it's pretty clear that not only am I one of the smartest guys in the world but I'm needed down there to help make the world a better place." He grabs a chute, puts it on and out he goes. The Pope looks to the Boy Scout, "Listen, I am an old man and I have lived a full life. And besides I follow the Master who says, "Greater love has no person than one who lays down his life for his friends. You, young man, have your life still ahead of you. Take the chute and live!" "Have no fear, Padre," said the boy, "we still got two chutes. Old smarty pants grabbed my backpack."

Some of you remember me telling the story five or six years ago when my friend Rick and I decided to jump out of a perfectly good airplane. It was and will be my only skydiving experience – one more item on my mid-life crisis checklist checked off. Four of us, not counting the pilot, squeezed into this little plane and two parachutes. Thankfully, it didn't turn out to be a bad joke – because the two guys with the parachutes, allowed the two other

guys without parachutes to hook on. Our backs to their chests. Tandem jumping. One guy without the chute goes with one guy with the chute. Never have I been more interested in how well a fastener works. And never have I stopped thinking of the fact that I willingly fastened myself to somebody who was for all intents and purposes a complete stranger. It's not that I didn't ask how many times the guy had jumped before and it's not that he said, "Ah this is my first." But still – two complete strangers – one with the chute and one without the chute – plummet 11,000 feet and both survive.

Now from time to time this experience has gotten me to thinking about fastening. To whom are we fastened? It's another way of asking about our relationships. With whom are we in relationship and to what degree do we sense a fastening? Because you know when it comes to relationships – especially ones which are tightly fastened – there is this reality that there are times when only one person has hold of a chute. Because that's often how life goes, right? Life is not an even experience. It's a big reason why we have relationships to begin with – because there are some days when I feel like I'm floating along tethered tightly to a parachute and there are other days when I feel like I am plummeting to the earth. And relationships have a lot to do with chute sharing. I'm in trouble here, can I share your chute? Or you look like you're having trouble with your rip cord, here grab on. Fasten yourself and we will ride this together. BFF is the acronym that we use to reaffirm to someone that we're tight – Best Friends Forever. I'm not sure we know exactly what we are saying when we say that – but isn't there some implication that we are sharing a chute? Hey man, when you're pulling and nothing's coming out – latch on.

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Easier said, of course, than done.

And that's what makes our story this morning so painful. Read any of the Gospels and you can't help but see this disciple Simon Peter who Jesus beckons from the shore of the sea – and invites into a relationship. First a relationship of teacher/student. Jesus has many things to teach and Peter has many things to learn. But the relationship grows deeper the longer they are together. Jesus starts to trust Peter more and more and even wonders if he would be the one to lead the movement after he's gone. Despite all the bonehead things Peter manages to do to prove himself inept, Jesus hangs in there with him. And then Jesus uses the “f” word – the “friend” word. No longer do I call you servants – I call you my friends. So there is this deep and fastened relationship that Jesus and Peter have grown into – which leads Peter to say without hesitation – “I will lay down my life for you! Whenever your chute doesn't work – you've got mine.”

But then comes the chance. The testing of the tether. Jesus on trial, Peter in the courtyard. Who's got the chute? Peter's got the chute. With no cord to pull, Jesus is on his own. And when given the chance to fasten himself to his friend – Peter claims he doesn't know him. Never met the guy. It's almost

too hard to believe. Because what we want to believe about ourselves is that we're not that kind of person. You can count on me. BFF.

But you know, easier said than done.

Relationships are hard. If they weren't hard the world would be a better place. But the world is kind of messed up because relationships are hard. And relationships are hard because life is uneven and one person ends up having the chute and another person doesn't and it's hard to figure out the fastener. It's hard to take the time to tether. And we're all falling so fast and I have to watch out for myself.

When I look back on my own life it doesn't take much to recall those times when a friend was likely waiting for my call or my note or my help – and it didn't come. I just got too busy or too wrapped up in myself. And I can remember moments when I was the one out there on a limb expecting someone to throw up a ladder ... and saying to myself, “Oh Charlie will be by. He'll build me a ladder if I need it.” And then to see Charlie over there sawing off the limb!

Who's got the chute? Not a bad question to ask I suppose when we think about the people to whom we are tethered in some way. Spouse, child, parent,

brother, sister, friend, acquaintance, fellow child of God – who’s got the chute and who needs the chute?

Because you see there’s more than one surprise in this story. First surprise Peter blows it. BFF – and you couldn’t even say you knew him. Jesus hurtles to the earth and Peter can quite find the fastener.

But there’s the second surprise. And the second surprise comes after the resurrection when Peter thinks that maybe the gig is over and it’s time to realize you blew it. Time to go back to where Jesus found him – to go back fishing. He’s disqualified himself. Misused his chute. And just in that moment Jesus appears – and who’s got the chute now? Jesus. And Jesus invites Peter and his friends to a meal – a little breakfast on the shore of the sea. Loaves and fish. And then Jesus pulls Peter aside for a conversation. Man to man. Friend to friend. It’s a pretty remarkable thing. A few days ago one of these guys said he didn’t know the other. And now the other wants to talk. He wants to talk because he has the chute. His brother is falling fast with guilt and hurt and shame – and Jesus pulls him close and talks to him about love. And in talking about love, they fasten. And Peter goes on to live into every bit of the dream that Jesus had for him.

Relationships are hard. And there is so much that can pull us apart. And there is so much emotion and hurt and disappointment and righteous indignation and shame – that messing with the dumb fastener doesn’t seem worth it. Too hard. Too complex. Too messy. And yet if there is anything that sets the gospel apart from any other self-help, life coaching book or podcast or TedTalk out there – is that Jesus invites us into this hard, complex and messy world of relationships and says, “Two

people, one chute. Stay fastened.” Because there will come a day when your cord isn’t going to work and there will come a day when you realize that what you have on your back is just a backpack – no chute. And thank God this fastener is working.

It reminds me of a story I read in the Wall Street Journal some 25 years ago about the Henderson family from up in Jennings, Missouri. Three person family – mom, dad and son. Presbyterian. Dad, an elder. Mom and son sing in the choir. The bonds between them a bit uneven. Dad a little distant, mom a little closer. But they figured out how to be an uneven family just like the rest of us. And then came the conversation between son and father where son tells dad that he is gay. And because it is 25 years ago dad just doesn’t know what to do with this news. He’s a factory guy. He doesn’t know about these things. And so there is more distance. But not too much distance for dad not to keep saying to son, “I love you. I don’t understand. But I love you.” And then comes the phone call years later from the son to say that he has AIDS. And that he doesn’t know what to do. And that he’s alone. And so Mr. Henderson checks his fastener and sees if its working. And it is working and he drives up to Chicago where his son lives and he moves in and he learns how to wash clothes and he learns how to give medicine and he learns how to empty bed pans. And he learns about how to share a chute. And he holds on tight until the good Lord takes his boy home.

Relationship are not easy. Take it from the one who invites us to this table. Let’s see who do we got here – Judas, he’ll be selling me for 30 silver pieces. Thomas, he doesn’t believe half of what I tell him.

James and John, busy trying to elbow everybody out of the seat of honor. Matthew, the tax collector. And Peter, good ol’ Peter – good ol’ ‘I will lay down my life for you’ Peter. Relationships are not easy. He never said they would be. And maybe that’s why he keeps calling us back here. The Lord’s Supper. Holy Communion. Loaves and fish. Bread and cup. “Yeah,” he says, “yeah, I know you think that guy’s a louse. And you think she’s a two faced hypocrite. I know that for every one of you there’s a strained friendship and some broken family. But we’re all falling friends. We’re all falling.

Two people. One chute. Stay fastened.



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