

David and Jonathan

Here's a modern story of unselfish love between brothers David and Jonathan.
One risks his life to give life to the other.

by Rev. Leland Stevens

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I delivered my first class sermon at seminary, back in the early 1950s, on the Bible's narrative about David and Jonathan. All the world knows the story about David and Goliath. The story of David's friendship with Jonathan, I think, is every bit as worthy of our attention.

Nervous before my classmates, I began that sermon with what I thought would get their attention, "David and Jonathan were buddies . . .

The instructor thought it might sound more polished to say that David and Jonathan were loyal and lasting friends. Well, regardless of the wording, then and there I decided that if God gave my future wife and me two sons, I would name them David and Jonathan.

Six years into our marriage, in 1958, God gave us David. The name, in Hebrew, means "beloved." Fourteen years later, in 1972, He gave us Jonathan. Jonathan means "God's gift." David had fun with Jonathan despite the 14 years between them. Home from high school, he would ask Jonathan, "How's my little Main Man?" Jonathan responded with a 5-year-old's enthusiasm; unable to pronounce David's name clearly, he called David "Main Man."

When David left home to attend Valparaiso University in Indiana, he seemed to miss Jonathan most of all. He would choke with emotion in calls home when it was Jonathan's turn to speak with his big brother. And Jonathan idolized David. David and Jonathan were buddies indeed.

A physical in third grade to play basketball revealed that Jonathan's kidneys functioned abnormally. We were told to simply "watch it."

Throughout grade school and high school, Jonathan played sports, basketball and baseball particularly. Abnormal amounts of protein in the urine continued to show up in physical after physical. In February 1995, a biopsy confirmed that his kidneys were severely scarred—making them far less efficient in removing toxins from the blood stream.

In August 1997, we were told Jonathan, now 25, should anticipate end-stage renal disease and dialysis. I remember how numb and helpless we felt in getting the news, with scarcely a word said on the way home.

The following January, Jonathan began dialysis three times weekly, four-and-a-half hours for each treatment, at Albuquerque, N.M., where he was taking his first clinical to complete his master's degree in physical therapy.

I was thankful that, retired, I could be with Jonathan for many of his 165 treatments, at Albuquerque, then Reno, Nev., and finally at Grand Forks, N.D., as he continued his physical therapy training. We passed the time at each dialysis playing Scrabble, talking, trying to make sense of things, encouraging each other more with presence than words.

In a most personal way, I was learning from the school of experience what a living faith is and how it benefits us, something I had talked about a lot over the years from pulpit and as counselor. Faith is not to expect that God will give us a rose garden without thorns. It is not the hope that "Someone up there likes us" and will push the celestial buttons in our favor. Faith is not simply a means to get what we want through prayer. Faith is more than to know *about* God. It is to know God. Faith is to believe that "all things work together for good to those who love God," because everything that comes our way has passed God's inspection. Faith moves us to trust that God will not cause us to experience more than we can bear. Faith is the certainty, Jesus Himself the example, that knowing we came from God, and we are going to God, we have nothing better to do in this life than to gird ourselves with the towel of service for others.

Jonathan expressed his faith simply and practically by saying, "You do what you have to do." As a family we tried to speak of what we could learn from this fact of life, not to ask the question *why*.

Jonathan helped us as much as we tried to help him. He lightheartedly described his dialysis take as "getting his oil changed." That, too, is a blessing from God, when we can view even the darker scenes of life with good humor and courage.

We were all picked up by the care and tenderness of doctors and nurses and fellow patients on dialysis. Even there, with 20 people in clinic chairs, blood coursing from arm through transparent tubes into the dialyzer and back to arm again, we could feel God's blessings in the patience and goodwill of those around us.

When Jonathan's kidneys eventually failed, and it came time to find a donor, each of us as family members wished to be the one to give Jonathan his new lease on life. We were all tested to be donors.

Then came the good news that David was a perfect match, something like a one-in-10,000 probability. Once again we learned something about faith. While faith should not be dependent on signs, what a good sign it was of God's blessings to know that our two boys, 14 years apart, were nearly as close genetically as twins. The miracle of healing that we were praying for God had already provided when our two sons were born. He made David a perfect match for Jonathan.

It was a grand thing that David—now a husband to Joanne and father of Allison, Matthew and Emily—did for Jonathan, to give of himself so unselfishly, taking the risk and enduring the pain.

The operation went well, but unexpected bleeding required the surgeons to re-enter David's abdomen and remove his spleen. The complication did not diminish David's insistence that giving Jonathan his kidney was what he wanted to do.

Jonathan was 10 years old when I editorialized in an issue of *The Lutheran Witness* dedicated to promoting awareness of the need for organ donations: "... When our last note is played, perhaps we will permit our song to linger on in the life song of someone else, as graciously we give of our body." Little did I realize then that, 17 years later, our David would give our Jonathan such a gift so graciously.

Yes, David and Jonathan have always been "buddies," and a kidney ties them together more closely still, and all of us.

THE SYNOD'S RESOLUTION ON ORGAN DONATION

At the Synod convention in 1981, the following resolution was adopted to encourage the donation of kidneys and other organs. The Missouri Synod became the first national church body to officially recognize the need for organ transplants.

Resolution To Encourage Donation of Kidneys and Other Organs

WHEREAS, We accept and believe that our Lord Jesus came to give life and to give it abundantly (John 10:10); and

WHEREAS, Through advances in medical science we are aware that at the time of death some of our organs can be transplanted to alleviate pain and suffering of afflicted human beings (see Gal. 6:10); and

WHEREAS, our heavenly Father has created us so that we can adequately and safely live with one kidney and can express our love and relieve the unnecessary prolonged suffering of our relative; and

WHEREAS, We have an opportunity to help others out of love for Christ, through the donation of organs; therefore be it

Resolved, That our pastors, teachers, and DCEs be encouraged to inform the members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod of the opportunity to sign a Universal Donor Card (which is to authorize the use of our needed organs at the time of death in order to relieve the suffering of individuals requiring organ transplants); and be it further

Resolved, That we encourage family members to become living kidney donors; and be it further

Resolved, That the program committees of pastors and teachers conferences be encouraged to include "organ and tissue transplants" as a topic on their agendas; and be it finally

Resolved, That the Board of Social Ministry and World Relief [now the Board for Human Care Ministries] seek ways to implement this program so that the entire Synod may join in this opportunity to express Christian concern.