

NO SHORTCUTS ALLOWED!

What comes to your mind when you hear the word shortcut? Maybe, if you are like me, you think of some path through the woods or across an empty lot that allowed you to get home from school more quickly.

Maybe, if you work in Stamford or New York, you think of some back roads that can shave all sorts of time off your commute if 95 or the Merritt are all backed up.

Maybe, if you are a computer literate, you think of icons on your desktop which take you directly to a particular program or website.

Maybe, if you are a cook, you think of the work saved by using a cake mix instead of baking up a dessert from scratch.

But no matter what comes to mind, chances are, in this day and age, when time is always at a premium, you view taking shortcuts as not only a good thing, but a necessity.

But you can't always take shortcuts. With some things you just have to go the long way around.

Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor in New York, learned about that several years ago when she worked with a volunteer program called Rural Mission.

Pastor Neumark was assigned to work on Johns Island, one of the barrier islands off the South Carolina coast.

Like so many coastal areas, Johns Island is being heavily developed with condos and apartment buildings. The long time residents of the island, primarily African-American descendants of slaves, are gradually being pushed out. Often, being illiterate and a bit naïve, they are being swindled out of their property by shrewd speculators.

Pastor Neumark spent much of her time on the island visiting the folks whose lifestyle and livelihoods were being threatened. She grew especially close to one Miss Ellie.

"I never could find out Miss Ellie's precise age," she writes, "but it was somewhere between ninety and one-hundred." (*Breathing Space*, 17)

Pastor Neumark and Miss Ellie would sit on Miss Ellie's front porch drinking sweet tea, while the older woman told story after story of her childhood. And recite verse after verse of scripture—for though she couldn't read, Miss Ellie could remember!

One of Miss Ellie's oldest and dearest friends was another old woman named Netta. While Netta's home wasn't all that far from Miss Ellie's, there was a wide stream that ran between their fields, which meant Miss Ellie had to walk a long distance through tall, snake-infested grasses to get to a spot where she could ford the water anytime she wanted to visit.

Pastor Neumark worried a great deal about her friend traveling such a treacherous way. Finally she hit upon an idea. And, with typical Yankee ingenuity and speed, came up with a solution. She recruited a few volunteers, bought some wood and nails, and in a day's time, built a plank bridge across the stream.

Excitedly she went to get Miss Ellie to show her the new bridge.

"Look," she shouted as they drew near the bridge, "a short cut for you to visit Netta."

She writes: "Miss Ellie's face did not register the grateful, happy look I expected . . . Instead, for a long time, she looked puzzled, then she shook her head, 'Child, I don't need a short cut.'" (Ibid, 18)

Then she told Pastor Neumark about all the stops she made along the way as she went to visit Netta. She told her about gossiping with her friend Mr. Jenkins, and bringing bits of quilting materials to Miss Hunter. She spoke of stopping at another's friend's house for a sip of raisin wine, and looking in on all the "old folks," as she put it, who were sick.

"Child," she said again, "can't take short cuts if you want friends in this world. Short cuts don't mix with love." (Ibid)

The four unnamed men who bring their sick friend to Jesus to be healed seemed to understand that truth. Like so many folks in the Bible we know very little about them—we don't know their names, their ages, their occupations. We don't even know where they lived. What we do know is that they were very good friends. They epitomized the old maxim: "A friend in need is a friend indeed."

It's a terrific story. Jesus comes to Capernaum. It was his home away from home. When folks here he is back, they crowd into the house where he is staying to hear him teach. Word has already spread, even at this early point in his ministry, that Jesus is a healer. So when these four friends hear he is in town, they decided to bring their paralyzed mate to see him. Maybe this rabbi from Nazareth can make him walk again.

But when they get there the place is bulging at the seams. It's so crowded that you can't even get to the door, much less through it. But they aren't about to give up. Since they've come this far they are surely going to go the distance! Even if it means going the long way around. Which is just what they do.

Scholar William Barclay describes the typical house in ancient Palestine: "The roof . . . was flat. It was regularly used as a place of rest and quiet so . . . there was an outside stair which ascended to it. . . . The roof [itself] consisted of flat beams laid across from wall to wall, perhaps three feet apart. The space in between beams was filled with brushwood packed tight with clay." (DSB: Mark, 53)

The four friends, undaunted by the crowd at the door, hoist their friend's pallet on their shoulders and make their way up the stairs. Then they begin to dig. Brushwood and clay fly in all directions, until, finally, they create a big enough hole in the roof for the pallet. They tie ropes to each corner, and slowly lower the mat and their friend right into the room.

The crowd, no doubt surprised by this entrance from above, moves back, and then gently they lower him to the floor, right in front of Jesus. He smiles—he is clearly moved by the depth of their friendship. He is impressed with their ingenuity. And, in time, after a theological debate about the source and cause of illness, the man is healed. He takes up his mat, and walks out the door. No doubt welcomed to the world of walking by his jubilant friends—the ones who had refused to give up. The ones who understood that shortcuts don't mix with love.

In our fast-paced world we have everything from instant oatmeal to instant messaging. There is even something called speed dating, where in the space of two hours or so at a bar or restaurant, you have short conversations with eight or ten people in the hopes of finding someone who is compatible with you. Someone who will be your date, and maybe your friend.

But certain things just take time. Certain things require patience. Short cuts have their place in the woods, and on the highways—even on computer desk tops and kitchen stoves—but there is no place for short cuts in friendships.

Many if not most of you have heard the story of my father's accident over fourteen years ago. You've heard how he was out for his evening walk when a drunk driver hit him square on and sent him flying through the air for thirty feet. You've heard how he crashed into a curb, and was paralyzed from the waist down and how his brain stem was twisted, causing permanent damage. Most of you have also heard about my mother and her deep love for him which has carried her through these last fourteen years of caring for him at home.

What you've not heard about are some of his friends.

After Dad got home from the hospital there was still some outside hope that he might regain the use of his legs. So the doctor suggested that they be stretched and exercised every day. Now you need to understand, the muscles in his legs were very tight, so moving them was a major undertaking. It was far more than my mother could handle on her own. So the word went out, and in a matter of days, several of Dad's friends from church and from the college where he taught volunteered to come and stretch his legs. Each one of them would come once a week and put him through the range of motion exercises.

And so they did. It was never easy. It was painful for my father, and he let the stretchers, as my Mom called his friends, know it. Because of his brain damage, he has no impulse control. And so, as his friends stretched his legs, he would call them every name known to every sailor around the world. And almost nightly he'd tell one friend or another he was going to hell.

But still they came. Four or five of them for twelve years. Every single week, for twelve long years. They've stopped now, because the doctor has snipped his tendons and stopped the exercises. But if they were still happening, those friends would still be coming. Still taking the verbal abuse. Still showing their friend their love. No short cuts. Just love.

After Dad had been home for about a six months or he was able to return to church in a wheelchair. My folks live about seven blocks from their church—and it's easier to simply push him in his chair than load him and his gear all up in a car. But that's a good distance for a tiny woman like my Mom to push a two-hundred and twenty-five pound man. Fortunately, she didn't have to—for another friend, Tom, volunteered to come every Sunday morning and push Dad to church. Rain or shine, Tom showed up—for some thirteen years. Every Sunday. No short cuts. Just love.

The time has come in the last year or so that Dad can't go to church. It's really more than he can physically manage. So Mom arranged for a nurses aide to come stay with him while she went to church. But Sunday morning is a hard time to get consistent help. And week after week she was left high and dry.

Then someone told her that a fellow named Chuck, who she knew from town, sometimes provided such care. So she gave Chuck a call—and sure enough he was willing to do it. And when she offered to pay him, he said, no, he didn't want any money for it—but if she wanted to donate money to the Youth Program at church, that would be fine by him.

And so she did. Chuck's still coming every Sunday, doing it for free. As a friend. No short cuts. Just love.

Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas in their book *resident Alien* write:
“Christians can survive only by supporting one another through the countless small

acts through which we tell one another we are not alone, God is with us. Friendship,” they write, “is not . . . accidental to the Christian life.”

How profoundly true. Friendship is in fact essential to Christian life—to all life. But it takes work, it takes commitment. It means going the long way around. It means refusing to mix short cuts and love. It means climbing up on the roof if necessary and getting your hand dirty. It means hanging in when the going gets tough and stretching yourself further than you thought possible. It means being there, rain or shine.

**Amen
John H. Danner**