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A Friend Is a Gift from God

a sermon on Philippians 4:10-19

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Do you have, or have you ever had, a true friend? ... What is a true friend? A true friend is the person you turn to when you have a problem you don't want anyone else to know about. A true friend will pick you up at the airport when your flight comes in at 2:00am. A true friend not only visits you in the hospital, but goes by your house to pick up what you need and brings it to you. A true friend will stay out late with you in the parking lot of the dorm, just throwing a football back and forth, because your girlfriend dumped you. A true friend knows the real you and loves you anyway. I could go on. There are many descriptions of a true friend.

Stan Ott talks about "refrigerator friends." He says your real friends are those who are comfortable opening your refrigerator when they are at your house. And vice versa: when you are at their house, you think nothing of helping yourself to something from the refrigerator. C.S. Lewis said a true friend is one who not only helps you out when you get in a pinch – of course a friend will help you – but also, the relationship does not suffer because of the help. "Having been given, it makes no difference at all. It was a distraction, an anomaly. It was a horrible waste of the time, always too short, that we had together" [*The Four Loves*, p. 70]. I have always felt the test of a true friend is this: A true friend will tell you the truth you need to hear, even if it is painful. Among the more painful moments of my life is the time I made a big blunder. I was lamenting my idiocy and its aftermath with my best friend, who was very consoling. He mentioned that he had feared I was making a mistake. "Why didn't you say anything?" I asked him. And he answered, "Because I knew you wouldn't listen." He was right. But I learned from that. I am more humble today because of it. He spoke a truth I needed to hear.

A friend is a gift from God. Many people come and go from our lives. We are blessed if among them is a handful of people we can call true friends. You may think people enter our lives more or less randomly, depending on where we live and work, or our stage in life. When you are single your friends tend to be other single people. When you get married, they tend to be married. I believe, however, that true friends are one more example of God's grace. Hopefully you know about God's big grace. He sent his Son to die for you, so that you might have eternal life. Although that is more than enough, he also pours out additional grace into our lives – everything from a beautiful day or a happy tune to a conscience that will not rest with anything less than holiness.

Friends are gifts of grace, signs that our Creator loves us; and this is true whether one acknowledges the Creator or not. God gave us friendship to bring joy to our hearts ... and to help us along the way.

Scripture says, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" [Prov 18.24]. And, "A friend loves at all times" [Prov 17.17]. Better than hearing about friendship, however, is seeing it in action. This is what our scripture reading allows us to do.

Let's start in the middle of the story. The apostle Paul is in prison. Scholars have fits trying to reconstruct an exact timeline for Paul's life. We just don't have enough information. Hints and clues dropped here and there in his letters give us light, but not enough to clarify things. So Paul may have been in Rome. More likely he was at Ephesus. He was in prison. Again, we do not know as much as we would like to. We know that when he was in prison at Rome, he was under house arrest. His friends could come and go, and he actually carried on his missionary work. This was very different from the time he spent in the local jail in Philippi, where he and Silas were chained up in a cell. All we know about this imprisonment is that his friends were free to see him, and they did. He had a few close colleagues who looked in on him and saw to his needs. Still, sitting in prison discourages and frustrates a great apostle who has churches to worry about.

Then one day, an old friend shows up, Epaphroditus! Paul knew him from Philippi. Philippi was the first European city where Paul started a church. That had been a special congregation for Paul, for many reasons, most importantly because of their friendship. The church at Philippi was the only church that supported Paul in his missionary work. We're not sure why. In some places he refused to accept any support. He often worked at his trade; he was a tentmaker. But the Philippian church supported him financially. In fact, when he was in Thessalonica, friends from the church in Philippi traveled 95 miles (which in those days was a long way – they probably walked) to bring money to Paul and his co-workers. The Thessalonian church did not support them; or if they tried to, Paul refused for whatever reason. Paul always maintained that as an apostle he had a right to make his living by preaching, just as Peter did. But Peter focused his attention among Jews. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, and in the Roman world, there were lots of philosophers and religious teachers who were just out for a quick buck. Paul may have refused support from many churches in order to distinguish himself from them.

In any event, he had always enjoyed a special friendship with the Philippian church. In other churches, troublemakers gave him a hard time. Not in Philippi. In other churches, false teachers gained a foothold and caused him headaches. Not in Philippi. In most of his other letters, Paul pulled rank and reminded people, "I am an apostle" – in other words, Paul had seen the risen Jesus with his own eyes, and his commission to

preach came directly from Jesus Christ. When he wrote to the Philippians, Paul did not pull rank. He appealed to their partnership in the gospel.

The Philippians loved Paul, and they expressed their love in many ways. They had heard he was in prison, and they wanted to do something. “Someone has to go. Someone has to bring a gift. Paul may be in need. This could be life or death. We’ve got to do something!”

Epaphroditus was chosen. A collection was taken. Based on the fact they sent someone to deliver it personally and the distance he had to travel, it must have been a substantial sum. The Philippian church told Epaphroditus, “Go help Paul. Let him know that although we are suffering some persecution, we remain loyal to Jesus. We remain loyal to our friend Paul. Make sure he knows we are praying for him.”

Epaphroditus went, and he found Paul, and Paul was overjoyed by the encouraging news from Philippi. Imagine if you were in his place. You are in prison, not sure when you will get out or even *if* you will get out at all. Suddenly an old friend shows up, representing more old friends who love you and want to help.

Not all was well, however. More accurately, Epaphroditus was not well. Either on the way or once he arrived with Paul, he became seriously ill. In fact, he nearly died. And his illness must have been a long one, because word of it got back to his friends in Philippi, and now they were concerned for him too. He did not die. By God’s mercy he recovered, and Paul sent him on home, his embassy to Paul having been successful. With him Paul sent a letter to the church he loved so much.

In this letter Paul told them three things: First, rejoice always – even in persecution. They had good examples in Jesus and Paul of how to hold up during hard times. Second, the gospel keeps advancing. The gospel was advancing, not in spite of, but because of their suffering and Paul’s. And the gospel is all the matters. Good times, bad times – those don’t matter at all so long as the Good News about Jesus keeps reaching more and more people. Third, thank you. Paul thanked God for his friends in Philippi. He thanked them for their gift and partnership.

Now here is something really cool. How do I know all this? Because the letter Paul wrote and sent to his friends in Philippi was preserved. We have it to this day. It is in the Bible, Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Our scripture reading comes from it. I don’t know about you. I love seeing the personal side of things behind the letter. We get a glimpse of the personal side of Paul, and we see what this friendship meant to him. The tone of this letter exudes trust, warmth, and affection.

C.S. Lewis wrote that the defining characteristic of friendship is shared interest in something. Lovers stare at each other. Friends stand side by side staring at something

else they both care about. Friendship asks the question, “Do you see the same truth that I do?” “Do you care about the same thing?” I think Lewis is right. Consider your friends. What is the glue that binds you to them? Shared perspectives? Shared goals? You both have kids the same age. You both live in the same neighborhood. You are both in the same clubs. You both like to play cards. You served in the same military unit. You have the same occupation. You grew up together. You see life the same way.

In the ancient world, friendship was considered the highest form of love. We moderns tend to exalt erotic love. Ninety percent of songs on the radio are about the glory or misery of romantic love. The ancients saw things differently. They thought friendship was the highest because it was not based on need. Most love is based on need. Most love needs the other person. Think of a child’s love for a parent. C.S. Lewis describes all this in his book *The Four Loves*, and he takes a positive approach. There is nothing wrong with need-love, because we really do need one another. To feel you do not need others is a bad spiritual symptom, just as a lack of appetite is a bad medical symptom because you really do need food. Friendship, however, is different.

Friendship is not based on need but on shared interest or vision. I see this truth reflected in our scripture reading. Paul and the Philippians shared a special friendship that was different from his relationship with any other church. What was it based on? What was their shared interest or vision? It was the gospel. Paul and his friends in Philippi both cared more about spreading the Good News about Jesus than they cared for their own well-being. Paul was willing to suffer beatings and imprisonment. The church in Philippi also suffered persecution, but they kept going. They sent gifts and Epaphroditus to help Paul fulfill his mission. Their shared love of Jesus and their desire to make him known bound Paul and his Philippian friends together. And this is the reason for the unusual way he has of thanking them.

In his letter, he put off thanking them for the cash until the end. When he does thank them, he qualifies his thanks. “Thanks for the gift, you finally came through.” They had often supported him in the past. Then they did not have opportunity to do so, probably because Paul was working too far away. Now, because of his need, they made a big effort to strengthen old ties. Verse 10 has a beautiful word picture hidden in it. When he says they *revived* their concern, the word describes the blooming of a flower in springtime. They revived Paul’s spirit. He was very grateful, and he acknowledges their past support and their constant concern for him, even though circumstances did not allow them to express it.

“Thanks for the gift, but I didn’t really need it.” When I was learning to write thank you notes, I was taught to mention the gift and describe how I would enjoy or use it. Paul goes against that advice, almost to the point of being insulting. The truth was, and he acknowledges it indirectly, he did need their gift. It came in very handy. They knew it. He knew it. Why make a point of saying, “I didn’t really need it”?

“Thanks for the gift, not that I asked for it.” Same question. They knew he didn’t ask for it, why say so? The answer is, he wanted them to know his friendship with them was not based on their usefulness to him. He was not using them. Also, his joy was not in the gift itself, but in their love for him that it represented. He wanted them to know how grateful he was, but more importantly, he wanted them to know he loved them as his friends, not because of what they gave him. It was not the gift he valued most, useful and necessary though it may have been. It was their love that meant the most. Their friendship was not based on giving and receiving. It was based on their shared love for Jesus and advancing the gospel. They were his partners. They were his friends.

Allow me now to go back and inject a word of sanity about verse 13, one of the most abused verses in the Bible. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” When I was in college, a campus ministry leader quoted this verse as proof that we could sing a song about peanut butter really, really fast. That kind of sloppy use of scripture turned me off from that organization. People pull this verse out of context to mean whatever they want it to mean. “I can do all things.” Really? Does anyone honestly believe I could become the next heavyweight boxing champion of the world? Of course not. But the verse says “all things”! If you take it this way, and you know it can’t be right, do you start to take what scripture says lightly? That is a danger. Better to understand what Paul really means. And to do that we read it in context. He is talking about how he has learned to be content regardless of his circumstances. Sometimes he has a lot: a soft bed to sleep in, plenty of good food, money in his pocket. Other times he’s sleeping on the ground without supper. What he cares about, however, is the gospel; so if he is advancing the gospel, he doesn’t care about externals.

Ancient people were generally not very happy. Face it, if you think life is tough now, they had it a lot worse. Stoics were philosophers who taught that the way to overcome your circumstances is to just not care about anything. They preached self-sufficiency. “I don’t need anyone or anything else.” Paul was not like them. He had learned to be content, but his secret was not self-sufficiency but Christ-sufficiency. That’s the point of verse 13. Paul could endure any circumstances, because he had Christ. To me, that is a far more encouraging truth than the idea that I can “do anything” because I am a Christian. To know that Christ will give me strength to endure, even if I lose everything I own or those who are dear to me or my health or anything else.

I have digressed too long. This is a sermon about friendship, and we have seen Paul’s friendship with the Philippians in action. What do we learn from it? What should we do?

First, if you have a good friend or friends, thank God. A true friend is a gift from God. Just as God gave Paul and the Philippian church to each other, God brings people

together today. He does it both to bless friends through one another and so that God's larger purposes are achieved. The Philippians helped Paul because they cared for him, but their help meant more people heard the Good News, and some of them believed. Friendship is one of God's best tools.

Second, cherish your friends. They are worth the effort. The Philippians went to considerable trouble for Paul. Epaphroditus nearly died. A true friend is worth the effort.

Third, don't count the cost. Just enjoy one another without tabulating who owes whom. When I was a young child, my parents were friends with a family who ate at our house nearly every Sunday. I am pretty sure my parents always supplied the meal. That went on for a long time, and no one thought anything of it, so far as I know. You might think the situation was unfair, that the other family should have bought dinner now and then. But that's not how friendship works. Years later, when my parents were divorced, and my mother was in need, who was there to help her? That same couple. I know they more than repaid all she had ever given them. Friends don't carry a balance sheet. I think we see Paul wrestling with that as he thanks the Philippians. Their friendship was about more than giving and receiving. Don't count the cost of a true friend.

Fourth, if you do not have a real, true friend, what can you do? I suggest you pray for one. Look for people who share your interests and way of looking at things. Be friendly, of course. And be patient. Finding a friend can be like finding a mate; it is often easier when you aren't looking. If your goal is to find a friend, you may find one. If your goal is something else, and you do what you love, you probably will find a friend along the way. Keep in mind, most of us are blessed to have a handful of true friends through the course of our life. A true friend is a rare and precious gift—a rare and precious gift from God. Amen.

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