

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

A few weeks back, the radio announcer on the station I listened to was all excited about the news that Courtney Cox, who rose to fame through the TV comedy, “Friends” had received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He was even more excited by the fact that her “Friends” co-stars had joined her for the celebration. Then he was anxious to talk in great anticipation of a reboot of that TV show. Obviously, he was a big fan of the show.

I may be one of a handful of people who have never seen “Friends”. Oh, I’ve seen bits and pieces of it here and there, but I have never watched a whole episode of the show. But even though I haven’t seen the show, I think I have a fairly good idea what it’s all about. Basically it is about a group of people who are friends, and whose friendships seem to survive through all manner of mishaps and strange relationships. In truth, there is far too much casual sex and far too many on again/off again romantic twists for my taste. But the one thing that probably has made the show popular is the fact that through thick and thin, through good times and bad, these people somehow managed to stay together. They managed to be there for one another. They managed to remain friends.

All of this talk about “Friends” triggered in my mind something I often did in years past. During the season of Lent I encouraged people to have a “friendship” focus leading up to Palm Sunday. The hope was that we would invite our friends to worship at the beginning of Holy Week, and lead them through the events that speak of God’s love for us all—the suffering and death of the Eternal Son on cross, and the joy of Easter morning with its glorious news of the resurrection victory of our Saviour over sin, death and the grave. We would do this because our love for our friends moves us to want them to know what the apostle John declares through the Holy Spirit: *“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”* (1 John 4:9, ESV)

In our bulletin today we have an announcement that encourages you to invite others to come and see the wonders of God’s love and grace in the events of this week, as we remember all that our Saviour has done for us and as we thank God for the victory we have through Jesus Christ. I don’t think we can say it often enough: our friends (well, actually the whole world) need to know what Jesus did for us, in giving Himself for us all on that cross and rising from the dead. They need to know the joy and truth of what we sing in the hymn: “What a Friend we have in Jesus!”

A true friend is a gift to be treasured. A true friend will be there for you when all others turn against you. The bible says: *“A friend loves at all times.”* (Proverbs 17:17, ESV) That is what we hope we will have in our friends. But sometimes it doesn’t work that way. People change. Relationships change. Friendships change. And in those times, the very person we thought would be there for us no longer seems willing or able to fulfill those expectations of friendship.

There is one friend who will not change; there is one friend we can always count on, a friend who will be there for us, who will love us, no matter what, and who always works to help His friends. We have a Friend who literally went to hell and back for us—and because of that you can be sure that He is a friend who will be there for you and stand with you in every need of your life, and throughout all eternity.

Someone once said that you cannot choose your relatives or your enemies, but you can choose your friends. Friends are your friends—not because they have to be, but because they want to be. And God wants us as His friends. That is really pretty amazing when you think of it. After all, there is a great deal of difference between God and us. God is perfect, wise, and loving. We are imperfect, stubborn, spiteful and selfish. God is the Creator of heaven and earth and ruler over all things that exist. We are lowly parts of His creation, even though we like to think that we are in charge of everything. We are as different as night and day, but the biggest sign of that difference is the fact that God is holy and we aren't. God knows the truth we often refuse to acknowledge about ourselves. He knows that each and every one of us is a sinner. And sin kills. It is because of sin that sorrow and pain exist in this world. Sin steals hope and peace and joy from our lives. Worst of all, sin results in death, including the eternal death of hell. Day after day we sin against our holy God in countless ways. Nothing we can ever do will be enough to rid ourselves of our sin.

In spite of this; in spite of the fact that we deserve nothing but His wrath and judgment, God wants to be our friend. Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the crowds cried out: ***“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”*** (John 12:13, ESV) What a truth there is in those words! Hosanna literally means “help” or “save, I pray.” Jesus came to do just that—to help and to save. He comes in the name of the Lord to deliver His friends. As St. Paul points out in our text, Christ was willing to set aside all His rights, His privilege and His honour; He was willing to lower Himself to our level in order to be there for us. Just imagine: ***Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.***

Would you go to such great lengths for your friends? There are many wonderful accounts of heroic actions that people have done for their friends. Many of them come out of the worst of human history, such as those who gave their lives for others in WWI or WWII. But would you do the same thing for your enemies, so that they could become your friends? We hear the promise of God through St. Paul: ***“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** (Romans 5:6–8, ESV)

That, my dear friends, loved by God, is a true friend, a friend who you can count on to be with you no matter what. Jesus did not die for Himself, or because of anything He had done. Rather, He does it for us. Jesus does the only thing that can save us, that can make a difference, that can bring hope and joy to our lives. He dies so that we might live. He gives Himself for the people He loves so much, the people He wants as His friends. He pays the full penalty for our guilt and brings us the forgiveness we need so much. Thankfully the Lord who dies for us is greater than death. He rises again from the dead, and is alive and well even now to be the help and strength of his friends, and to go on loving them all the days of their life. This friend would do anything because He loves you. And He will be there for you, no matter how great the need, no matter how dark the day.

During the days of His earthly life, Jesus was called ***“a friend of tax collectors and sinners”***. (Luke 7:34, ESV) The Pharisees who gave Him that title meant to use it to humiliate Jesus, but Jesus took it as a badge of honour. That is what he wants to be—the friend of sinners. He wants to be your friend. When we need a friend because we are disappointed by our failures, there is a friend who will encourage and forgive us. When we need a friend because we are stressed out about the future, there is a friend who can calm our troubled heart. When we need a friend because we are worried about unemployment, the failure of our health, or the pain of heartbreak, there is a friend who will help and protect us. That friend, of course, is Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our God. He is the Friend who loves us with a perfect love. He is the friend who came to save us.

Earthly friends can fail us at times. Even we, as a church, must also admit that there are times when we have failed to be loving and caring to the people who need us to be their friends. May God forgive us for our lack of friendship to the people He calls as His friends. But while we may not be the perfect friend in time of need, God is. That living Lord wants to be your friend. He wants you to know the power of His love at work in your life each day. He wants you to turn to him in your moments of fear and sadness; to lay your burdens on Him; to let Him help you. He is the answer to your hosannas—your prayer, “save, I pray”. He loves you passionately and completely and sends the Holy Spirit to

enable you to believe in His friendship and see the difference it makes in your life. What a friend we have in Jesus. What a joy it is to share His friendship with our friends, too! Amen.