

We've Got A Friend in High Places

Ephesians 1:15-23; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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Ephesians 1:15-23 (NIV)

¹⁵ For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength, ²⁰ which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. ²² And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.

1 Corinthians 15:20-26 (NIV)

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him. ²⁴ Then the end will come, when [Jesus] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For [Christ] must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death....
28 When He has done this, then the Son Himself will be made subject to Him who put everything under Him, so that God may be all in all.

We've Got a Friend in High Places

It was one of those events that you can never forget witnessing. A skyscraper was going up. Hundreds of people paused daily to glance up at it.

One day they watched as a giant metal beam was being raised to be placed high on the enormous steel skeleton of the skyscraper. And then something terrifying happened. As the girder came near, a workman leaned out from the sixteenth floor to seize it. It was then, as he lost his balance and fell, that the spectators gasped. Fortunately, he was able to clutch the end of the giant beam that was being raised with both his arms and legs.

The ground crew stopped the hoisting engine so the man could continue to hold on, but the man's weight situated on one end began to tilt the beam to a vertical position, which would surely cause him to lose his grasp and fall to a his death.

Just when all seemed lost, something else took place that seemed almost miraculous to the onlookers below. Without pause, another worker on the same floor, seeing his friend's predicament, leaped through space and landed on the other end of the girder, where his weight leveled the beam. Amid the applause of the crowd, both men were safely lowered to the street.

It pays to have a friend in high places, doesn't it? Someone who will literally risk his life to save yours? Of course, it pays to have friends in high places — even if they never risk much on your behalf. What is it we say? It's not what you know — it's who you know that matters.

It reminds me of the story about the little boy who came home from the playground with a bloody nose, a black eye, and torn clothes. It was obvious he'd been in a fight and lost. While his father was patching him up, he asked his son what happened.

“Well, Dad,” he said, “I challenged Larry to a duel, and I gave him his choice of weapons.” “Uh-huh,” said the father, “that seems fair.” “I know,” said the boy, “but I never thought he'd choose his big brother!”

You know where I'm heading, don't you? Thank God, we have a big brother! Thank God we have a Friend in the highest place possible.

Today is the last Sunday in the Church year. Next Sunday, the First Sunday in Advent, begins a new calendar year for the church. Next week we begin preparing for Christ's coming and we celebrate His birth; then, in the following months, we move through His life, death and resurrection, then to His ascension to be with the Father, then the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church universal; then we have the Sundays following Pentecost; and now we are about to begin the cycle all over again.

This Sunday is referred to as Christ the King Sunday and in a fitting way to climax all that Christ means to us, we celebrate His exalted role at the right hand of the Father, “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come,” as Paul writes in Ephesians 1.

In other words, we have a “Big Brother,” or, if you will, a Friend in the highest regions of heaven. Garth Brooks sang about having friends in low places, which, of course, is what country music is all about. But you and I have a friend in the highest place possible — at the right hand of God.

Today I want to focus for just a few moments on why Jesus is so important to us. The famous evangelist Billy Sunday once noted that there are two hundred and fifty-six names given for Jesus in the Bible. Sunday imagined that this was because Christ is infinitely beyond all that any one name could express.

I believe that's true and, of course, I could never in one sermon explore all the grandeur of Christ, but, for a few moments, let's focus on the most critical reasons we celebrate the coming of Christ into our world.

FIRST OF ALL, WE CELEBRATE CHRIST AS OUR KING BECAUSE HE REVEALS TO US THE VERY NATURE OF GOD.

Jesus reveals that nature in His teaching, and He reveals that nature in His own life. The Hebrew Bible uses beautiful, poetic language to describe the majesty of God. But did you know that, according to scholars, Jesus was the first person to actually call God Abba, Father? As you know, Abba can be translated as a term of intimacy, "Daddy." Jesus would pray, "Abba, Father . . . everything is possible for You."

A great New Testament scholar noted, "There is no instance of the use of 'Abba' as an address to God in all the extensive prayer-literature of Judaism . . ." There is no record of somebody doing that before Jesus did.

The Hebrew Bible tells us many wonderful things about God, but it never calls God Abba. Only Christ was that audacious. He taught us that God is like a loving Father who never turns His back on His children. Indeed, because of Jesus we have come to know that God's very nature is love.

In his Daily Study Bible Series on the Gospel of John, Dr. William Barclay tells of a little girl who, when she was confronted with some of the more bloodthirsty and savage parts of the Old Testament, felt called upon to offer some explanation in defense of God. She said: "That happened before God became a Christian."

Now, make no mistake about it. The God of the Old and the New Testament are the same God. You need both the Old and the New Testament to get a complete understanding of the character of God. In the Old Testament we get a fuller understanding of the Holiness of God and the seriousness with which God hates sin. From all the stories in the Old Testament you can begin to get an understanding of why we need Jesus because none of us can ever be good enough on our own to make it to heaven without Him.

Then in the New Testament, with the coming of Christ, we get a fuller understanding of God's love and God's grace. We see in Christ's life and death God's agape love being lived out — a love that is unconditional and never-ending. And then Jesus makes this audacious statement, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9)." That is, you don't have to deduce God's nature from Jesus' teachings alone. All you have to do is to look at Christ's life.

I like the way Pastor Edward Markquart describes Christ's relationship with God. He likened it to a University of Minnesota study of identical twins.

The twins in this study had been separated at birth. Though separated for thirty to forty years, they were still alike in many ways — for example in the way they reacted to smoke; the way they crossed their legs; the similarity of their toothpaste. One set of these twins separated at birth even used the same rare cologne from England.

The physiologist who directed this study drew his conclusions by taking readings of their galvanized skin responses as measured by electrodes in their bodies. He found that their reactions to stimuli were identical. The twins listened to symphonies and the measurements of their galvanized skin responses were the same. When they heard shocking noises, their brains responded just the same. The twins had the same genes; the same chromosomes; after being separated for thirty to forty years, they were still very much alike.

Then Pastor Markquart makes this observation: “What the Bible is saying is that Jesus is identical to the Father. Christ is the same substance of the Father, the same nature. If you want to know what the God the Father is like, look at the genetic reproduction of the Son.” That is the first reason we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Christ revealed to us the nature of God. But there is another reason this day is so important to us:

IN HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS CHRIST MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO HAVE A NEW LIFE IN HIM.

He died that we may live. Harry Ironside was one of America’s best-known Bible teachers in the early twentieth century. One of Harry Ironside’s favorite stories was about Czar Nicholas I of Russia. The czar had a good friend who asked him to provide a job for his son. And so the czar appointed the son as a paymaster in the Russian army.

This was a position of great responsibility. Unfortunately the son was a gambler and lost nearly all the money entrusted to his care. Then word came that the auditors were coming to examine the young man’s records.

The young man realized that he owed a huge debt — far greater than he could ever repay. And so he decided to take the coward’s way out. At midnight he would use his pistol to end his life. Before committing this act, however, he wrote out a full confession, listing all he had stolen. He ended his confession with these words: “A great debt. Who can pay?” Then he fell asleep, weary from his exertions.

Late that night, the czar himself paid a surprise visit to the barracks and noticed a light on in the young man’s room. The czar found the young man asleep with the letter of confession next to him. He read the letter and instantly understood what the young man had done. Then the czar did something quite stunning. He bent over, wrote one word on the bottom of the letter, and left.

When the young man woke up, it was past midnight. He took up his gun in order to follow through with his plan to end his life, when he noticed that someone had written something on the suicide note

beneath his final words, “A great debt. Who can pay?” The one word was actually a signature: “Nicholas.”

Checking his records, he realized that the signature was genuine. The czar knew what he had done and was willing to pay the huge debt himself. “A great debt. Who can pay?” “Nicholas.”

“Resting on the words of his commander-in-chief, [the young man] fell asleep. In the morning a messenger came from the palace with the exact amount the young man owed. Only the czar could pay. And the czar did pay.”

We don’t fully understand just how Christ’s death on the cross atones for our sins. Different theologians have their own theories. But we do know this: God’s grace and forgiveness are at the very heart of the Gospel. St. Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him. Then the end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death . . . When He has done this, then the Son Himself will be made subject to Him who put everything under Him, so that God may be all in all.”

Christ not only revealed to us the nature of God, but in His death on the cross Christ made it possible for us to have a new life in Him. When we stand at the foot of the cross and look at His hands and feet which were pierced on our behalf, we know just how very much God loves us and we are led to live our lives for Him. But one thing more needs to be said:

THROUGH THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, CHRIST IS OUR CONSTANT COMPANION TODAY AS WE SEEK TO LIVE FOR HIM.

Years ago author and devout Christian Bruce Larson wrote a very helpful book titled, *Believe and Belong*. In that book he told about one exercise he used over the years to help people surrender their lives to Christ.

He said that for many years he worked in New York City. During this time he used his office to counsel with people who were struggling with their faith. Often he would suggest they walk with him from his office down to the RCA Building on Fifth Avenue. In the entrance of that building is a gigantic statue of Atlas. He describes this portrayal of Atlas as a beautifully proportioned man who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders.

“There he is,” Larson would say to a friend who was struggling, “the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under this burden. Now that’s one way to live,” he would point out

to his companion, “trying to carry the world on your shoulders. But now come across the street with me.”

Larson would then walk them across Fifth Avenue to Saint Patrick’s Cathedral. There behind the high altar of that great cathedral is a little shrine of the boy Jesus, perhaps eight or nine years old, and with no effort he is holding the world in one hand. In Larson’s mind his point was illustrated graphically.

“We have a choice,” he would say. “We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, ‘I give up, Lord; here’s my life. I give you my world, the whole world.’”

What a simple but beautiful reminder of a choice we make every day — to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders, or to yield that burden to our Friend who sits at the right hand of God.

Some of you can remember when Phil Rizzuto was the record-setting shortstop for the New York Yankees. We’re told that in one game Rizzuto trotted out to his position in the top of the ninth inning, with his Yankees behind 9-0. Before the opposing team came to bat, Rizzuto turned away momentarily from the batter’s box, too dejected to look.

It was at that moment that he caught sight of the great Joe DiMaggio in center field. Immediately Rizzuto said, “We’re going to win this game.” All it took was knowing that Joe DiMaggio was on his team that gave Rizzuto the confidence to play on.

Knowing that Jesus is on our side should surely be enough to make us winners in the game of life. We have a Champion, a Big Brother, a Friend in high places who will accompany us into any battle, help us carry any burden, even give His life for us. Don’t give in or give up. After all, you have a Friend in the highest of all places. His name? Jesus the Christ — King of Kings and Lord of Lords. God bless and amen.

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