

**Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Festival of Friendship  
September 29, 2002**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**What a Friend We Have in Jesus!**

1. He was our Friend in the lowest place
2. He is our Friend in the highest place

***Philippians 2:5-11***

***Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:***

***Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be  
grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!***

***Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
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,

The hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” was written by Joseph Scriven. Scriven was born in Ireland, the son of a captain in the Royal Marines. He finished college in Dublin and had plans to marry, but then tragedy struck. On the eve of his wedding day, his fiancée drowned. Still reeling from the tragedy, Scriven packed his bags and moved to Canada. He settled in Ontario and took a position as a tutor. After a time, Joseph Scriven met a woman named Eliza Roche and once again made plans to marry. But as the wedding date approached, Eliza became ill and died very suddenly. After this, Scriven determined to pattern his life after what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. He dedicated his life to serving the poor, the sick, and the handicapped. He became known as an eccentric: “the man who saws wood for widows and sick people who are unable to pay.” But those poor people for whom Joseph Scriven sawed wood and did chores must have considered Joseph quite a friend. Joseph Scriven’s one claim to fame, the hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” points out beautifully and convincingly that our greatest Friend is Jesus

Christ. This morning, on the basis of a series of verses in Philippians 2, I'd like to show you what a wonderful Friend we have in Jesus. He was 1] our Friend in the lowest place and he is 2] our Friend in the highest place.

### **1. He was our Friend in the lowest place**

The section of Philippians that I just read is part of an ethical section in this letter. The apostle Paul tells us how to work for unity in our homes and churches. He says, *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."* He urges the kind of life that focuses not just on our own needs, but also on the needs of others. To reinforce this, he cites the ultimate example of unselfishness: *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Then he continues by quoting the words of an early Christian hymn that describes just what a Friend Jesus is. He says about Jesus, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."*

If Joseph Scriven was eccentric for cutting firewood for poor people, I suppose that must make Jesus off-the-scale eccentric. Though he was in very nature God, he took the very nature of a servant. Jesus voluntarily laid aside not the chance of living a soft life, but the full use of his divine powers. This laying aside of the full use of his divine powers was not something he did grudgingly, but voluntarily. "He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." Jesus' humility is seen in this: that when he came and shared our humanity, he became the very lowliest of human beings. He didn't startle the world with a glorious arrival, full grown and mature, but was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born in the normal way of the Virgin Mary. As God he knew all things and could do all things; nothing was impossible or unknowable. As a lowly man he voluntarily underwent the indignities of pain and suffering and hunger and, finally, the ultimate indignity of death, even death on a cross. This man who was also true God died like a slave, nailed to a shameful cross. He humbled himself to the lowest place.

But this wasn't motivated by eccentricity. What was at work in Jesus was not a love of humiliation, but a love for sinners. And that is what we are: sinners. Sin isn't just a matter of being prone to periodic eruptions of selfish ambition or ungodly pride (or lust or impatience or anger). Those things are only symptoms of an inborn alienation from God that renders us guilty before the Judge of the world and condemns us to spend eternity in hell.

The outlook was grim. But Jesus considered rescuing us from that fate to be of greater importance than his own comfort or convenience. He came in servant's form to be the Substitute for every one of us. As he lived in perfect obedience to God's will he offered to God the stainless sacrifice that we could never manage. And the death on the cross that St. Paul mentions here was Jesus dying to pay the penalty we owed because of our sins. This obedience of Jesus in our place

is what makes it possible for me to say as I did earlier this morning, “God, our heavenly Father, has forgiven all your sins.” Through faith in Jesus we no longer live under God’s condemnation. We are forgiven. We are free. We are bound for the glory of heaven. If God were to say to us when this life is over, “Why should I let you into heaven?” we can answer confidently, “My Friend, Jesus has paid all I owe and has given me the holiness required to enter heaven.” Our Friend, Jesus, has opened heaven for us.

The membership lists of most Christian congregations don’t contain many impressive names. St. Paul noted that long ago in his letter to the Corinthians. He wrote, **“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.”** (1 Cor. 1:26) There weren’t many names to drop in Corinth. Nor are there here. But as believers in Jesus Christ, Paul says here, we do have a Friend in the highest place. That’s Jesus, who was our Friend in the lowest place, but is now our Friend in the highest place.

## **2. He is our Friend in the highest place**

After writing about the humiliation of Jesus (his becoming lowly), Paul now writes about the exaltation of Jesus (his being lifted up). He says, *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 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.”*

The humiliation of Jesus ended on Easter Sunday morning. By the power of God he took his life back again. His body and soul were reunited. With his glorified body and soul he descended to hell, as we said in the Apostles’ Creed, and announced that our reservations there had been canceled. When Jesus rose from the dead that Easter morning, he assured us that our sins had been taken away. His sacrifice for our sins was pleasing to God. More than that, we know now that Jesus’ word is true. The one who can predict not only his death, but also his resurrection, and then make it happen, has earned the right to have his Word considered reliable. More personally, the certainty of our own resurrection from the dead lies in the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. He proved that it can happen. He proved that he can make it happen. He is worthy of our trust.

When all this is laid out before us—how our Friend went to the lowest place to take our place in death and how he has now gone to the highest place where he remains our Friend—the only right reaction is to bow our knees before Jesus and to make the basic confession of the Christian faith: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” That is to say, the man Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the promised Savior of the world. The name that was once the object of scorn and ridicule is now the name above all names. It is, as the apostles declared, **“the only name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”** (Acts 4:12)

There are some real advantages to having a Friend in the highest place. We more commonly call them blessings. One blessing is that Jesus, since he's risen from the dead and ascended to heaven, hasn't stopped working for us. He is still interceding for us. That is, he's pleading our cause before God the Father. The apostle John put it this way: **"We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."** (1 John 2:2)

And there's another blessing that comes with having a Friend in the highest place. He rules all things. Jesus, who resumed the full use of his divine powers when he rose from the dead, is now the Lord of all. He is the King of the Universe, but still passionate about what's in our best interests. So he uses the almighty power that he did not fully use during his humiliation. He uses it for his church, he uses it for us, to make everything that comes into our lives serve his loving purpose of bringing us to heaven. He's that in charge. He's that much in control. And he's still our Friend.

It's terribly sad to be without friends. Think of a child struggling to make the adjustment to new surroundings with no familiar or friendly faces in sight. Think of someone eating lunch alone, not sensing any acceptance from those around her. Part of our goal on a Festival of Friendship Sunday like this one is to announce our intention that this church is a place where friendships flourish and people are accepted. But more than that, our goal is to introduce (and re-introduce) you to Jesus Christ, the most wonderful Friend anyone can have. By what he once did for us as our Friend in the lowest place, and by what he is still doing for us as our Friend in the highest place, he has enabled us to say, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus!" Amen.