

**May 1-**

Sermon: What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Scripture: John 14:23-29

As I grew up, the relationship with my father evolved. He became more than my father, he became a colleague in ministry and, most important of all, he became my best friend or, to use the term in the scripture of today, one of my companions in life. Now I realize that this doesn't always happen with our parents, but it did between my father and I. We had a similar outlook on life and, since I was the "tag-a-long," we had almost ten years where I was the only child left at home. As I helped him with gardening and woodworking we would chat. Those conversations continued as we fished and camped together. As I grew into my 20's I came to appreciate his wisdom and ability to see a bigger picture of life than I could see at the time. As I explored entering into ministry those conversations deepened. Then, in the ensuing years as we became colleagues in ministry, he was always the first person I would turn to when I had questions about what to do, or if I had issues with the "boss." Since his passing a few years ago I think the deepest part of my grief is that I no longer have that companion to turn to for wisdom, support, and encouragement. What has surprised me a lot is that I now have that relationship with my son. He calls when there are major decisions to be made, asking me if he is missing anything. He appreciates my ability to see that bigger picture. Even more surprising, I have become that trusted companion to a few friends who rely on my wisdom in their challenging times.

All of us have or have had that person or people in our lives that are beyond friend and have become a companion. When you look at synonyms for companion you get words such as friend, buddy, or confidant. Most of us are also blessed to be that type of person to others. That term, which the Common English Bible translates as companion, Jesus used to describe the actions of the Holy Spirit. It is a word that is rich in meaning. In some earlier translations it is rendered as the Advocate. The translators all are trying to define the Greek word "Paraclete" which is best translated as one who comes along beside us. It is through the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to continue to be present with his disciples. Jesus says that God will send the Holy Spirit to be alongside his disciples.

All of this got me thinking of that old gospel hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” It shares in word and song some of the same feelings that I have about the gifts of companionship I received from my father and helps me to fully embrace what Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples as he realized that his time among them was coming to an end.

The hymn encourages us to take everything to God in prayer. We are promised if we do this we will find peace. The peace Jesus is talking about giving to his disciples and is lifted up in prayer is more than the absence of conflict. It is a profound and holistic sense of well-being. It is the kind of peace which the world cannot give, but can only come from God.

We understand how Jesus continually talked about the importance of prayer and modeled a prayer life where the disciples knew he took everything to God in prayer. In fact, prayer was so important to Jesus that the disciples finally asked him to teach them to pray. His last days on earth were continually bathed in prayer. This prayer life was the deep well of strength that Jesus drew from that allowed him to do his ministry. In talking about it to the woman at the well he called it living water. He wants all of us to learn to take everything to God in prayer, knowing our companion cares about us and will give us peace. As I said, this is the part I miss most about not having my father around. So many times I would love to go to him for comfort, advice, and support. But God is faithful! God makes up for what my father cannot give through the gift of the Spirit.

We are also told that in our trials and temptations Jesus is there. In his final discourse Jesus promised that he will be present with the disciples through the Holy Spirit and, because of this, his disciples need not be anxious. We understand what a great promise this was to the disciples. On many occasions during their time with Jesus we hear about their anxiety. Remember when the storm came up as they were on the Sea of Galilee? It says they woke Jesus because they were afraid. Jesus had the ability to calm their fears, to help them see that they could get through the times of trials and temptations. To think that they could find this same kind of security after Jesus was gone from among them was probably quite a stretch for the disciples. Yet, we see that over time this is what happened. In the midst of struggles they remained faithful. They

had a calmness, that peace that passes understanding, as they continued to share the good news. That is what a companion does for us. I recall several times when I called my father in the midst of high anxiety about something happening in my life. Hearing his voice, and his reminding me that we would get through this, was so calming. He always had that ability to step back from the moment and see the big picture. It was a relief being reminded that all of the negative stuff I was feeling was not the only way to look at what was happening. I know that I now provide that grounding for others. So remember, you always have a companion in God who will listen, help you face your trials, comfort you in your sorrows, and that knowledge should ultimately give you deep abiding peace.

Another powerful message from this hymn is that Jesus knows our weaknesses and still loves us. One of the “teaching by action” pieces of Jesus life was his continuing love for his disciples even while he had to deal with their failings. We have talked much recently about Jesus and his attitude towards Peter. No matter what Peter did, how much he was scolded; he knew he was loved by Jesus. Thomas was met in his doubts and I feel it was done with love. Too often we feel we have to hide our weakness and our failures from God. We are instead told to take them to God in prayer. Back to my father, I think about some of the times early in my ministry where I was really having some struggles. I decided I was seminary trained and mature enough to be able to handle whatever situation arose. Sometimes it worked. More often I muddled along thinking, “I should have asked for advice.” When I would turn to dad there was no scolding or put downs but instead an examination of the facts. That was often the most painful because in doing so I could see my shortcomings clearly, without him even having to point them out! But then there were the words to help me pick up the pieces and go on from there. Our companionship grew most through our weakness. As his health declined and our roles began to be reversed where I was helping him and counseling him, I could feel his pain as he talked about his weaknesses, from dementia, from declining health and other. I also saw his relief when he unburdened himself and then we figured out the way forward. It gave him great peace.

We are reminded that Jesus knows our fears and comforts us. He said to the disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,” When Jesus meets his frightened disciples after his resurrection, it was with a greeting of

peace. We are told that this profound love of God that Jesus made known to his disciples continues to be made known to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit assures us that we are never abandoned, even in the midst of the loss, pain, and sorrow that are part of life in this broken world.

In closing, let me share with you one brief story about the role of companion. Many of you got to meet my friend Tom who directed the bell choirs for the Moscow United Methodist Church. Tom is dying of cancer. We visit every few weeks. Sometimes the conversations are long, other times just a few minutes. I am the one person to whom he pours out everything he is feeling. He feels he has to be strong for his wife and kids but with me he lets it all out, from his fear to his anger, knowing I care and will be there for him. Almost every time we end a call or visit he says, "Thanks buddy for being there."

That gift of companionship is offered to each of us. We sometimes are blessed to have that person still in our lives. But if not we can open our heart, with our joys, our failures, our weaknesses and fears knowing God is with us, has come along side us and will help us. We are not alone. We are loved.