

I want to begin this morning by celebrating how our church has been a good friend in light of the tornadoes that hit a few weeks ago. First, we have been able to take care of one of our own. We have a member whose home was severely damaged, and we've been able to help her bridge the gap as she recovers. Additionally, because of your generosity, we sent several thousand dollars to Samaritan's Purse, a ministry with boots on the ground right after the tornadoes hit. And, finally, we've gotten in the education business. This past week, The Cambridge School began holding classes in our Tree Top area. They had been meeting at Northway Church, but as you can see, their building was devastated by a tornado, and the school needed a new place to meet. So, with the blessing of our elders, and due to the good work of XP Tommy Shelton, Facilities Director Michael Dembicki, and elder and real estate guru Kirk Williams, an agreement was made to host that school in our building through at least May. I am grateful and proud to say we have been a good friend to our people and our city in the midst of this crisis.

I use that word "friend" intentionally because friendship can be a tricky thing these days. Aristotle defined it as goodwill given for the sake of the other, and that's what we have done. That seems simple and easy enough, but the statistics show people are struggling to make that happen. A recent study showed that 45% of people find it difficult to make new friends, and the majority of participants said they hadn't made a new friend in five years. We may be more connected than ever, but we are struggling to connect. We can't even buy Popeye's new chicken sandwiches without getting into fist fights.

But thank God for the gospel. The gospel, at its core, is a story about relationship. It tells us we have been reconciled back to God to be with him forever. It also tells us that, because of what Jesus has accomplished, **he's taken a bunch of broken people, given us to each other, and enabled us to love and care for one another in Christian friendship as we take this journey with God.** But how do we live that out?

Jesus defined friendship in a couple of different ways. First, he called his disciples friends because he had let them in on and invited them into the life-changing mission the Father had sent Jesus to fulfill. And, later, he said that love is best demonstrated when one lays down his life for his friends. **To Jesus, a Christian friend points another to God and gives his life to make that happen. The result of all that is joy.**

This morning we are going to see that lived out in two examples in the book of Philippians. My prayer is that we would be encouraged to follow their example, but I also want to celebrate, because what we read in these verses is what is happening in our church, and I want to show you how.

A Christian friend prioritizes the interests of Jesus for the welfare of others. Like so much else in the Christian life, the kind of friend we are comes down to a decision of whether this going to be about me or about someone else.

[Philippians 2:19-24] ¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰ For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served

with me in the gospel. ²³ I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, ²⁴ and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

Paul plans on sending Timothy to get a report on how they have responded to the instruction in this letter and to let them know the outcome of Paul's trial. The Philippians were likely thrilled by this news. They already knew Timothy well. Paul's first visit to that city came right after he invited Timothy to join him in Acts 16. They have known him as long as they have known Paul, and **there is joy when friends come together**. They also would be eager to hear of what came of Paul's trial.

Timothy is the clear choice for this assignment because of his character. Paul knows he will be devoted to their welfare, and that motivation comes from his dedication to the interests of Jesus. **When we are interested in what the selfless Jesus is interested in, our self-interests become uninteresting.** Timothy is a model of the character Paul just encouraged of the Philippians and showed in Jesus.

[Philippians 2:3, 6-7] ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves...⁶ (Jesus), though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

If Jesus sought his own interests, he would have stayed where he was. But he was interested in what the Father was interested in, and that meant he came for our welfare. Timothy goes with that same attitude, and the Philippians will be blessed because of it.

While Timothy is presented as the model here, I believe Paul prioritizes Christ's interests too. Paul sending Timothy is no small gesture. Even though he is in bondage, he is willing to part with the one he calls "son" in order to check in on and encourage the ones he calls "my beloved" in 2:12. This isn't a quick jaunt up Central Expressway. It is a trip that will take months, leaving Paul without his closest friend for that time. But he is so committed to their growth and to hear about it that he sends him anyway. His expectation is to be cheered by the news. **True Christian friends rejoice when we witness the advance of the gospel in someone else's life.**

We have a wonderful example of this. You may remember Steven Christopher. Steven was on our staff for a while and his wife Chelsea and he were part of our church and in a Life Group with Taylor and John Siemens. Steven recently accepted a pastorate in Las Vegas, and Taylor and John visited him this past week and attended his church last Sunday. Thankfully what happened in Vegas didn't stay in Vegas.

Their worship leader called Steven at 7:30 last Sunday morning and said she was too sick to come in. And guess what happened? Our Taylor led Steven's church in worship. She could have focused on her own interests, said she was on vacation, and just needed a break. We know how she pours herself out for us. But she prioritized the interests of Jesus above her own, and the people of that church were blessed because of it. When we prioritize the interests of Jesus, there will be no shortage of opportunities to be a Christian friend to others for their welfare.

A Christian friend follows the example of Jesus for the welfare of others. The one who calls us “friend” has shown us the way to express that.

[Philippians 2:25-30] ²⁵ I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, ²⁶ for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹ So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, ³⁰ for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Here and in 4:18 we see that Epaphroditus was a Philippian sent to Rome to bring Paul a material gift and encouragement from his people and join him in his gospel work. But somewhere along his journey, or while in Rome, he fell gravely ill, near the point of death. He could have tapped out. He could have tried to return home. But he pressed on, committed to Christ and committed to his friend Paul, all at the risk of his own life. He too was following the example of Jesus.

[Philippians 2:8] ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus endured suffering and, ultimately, the cross to complete the work he was sent to do. Following his example, Epaphroditus was willing to do the same, to risk his life for the work of Christ. When we live and love this way with one another, we can experience the same friendship Paul describes in five different ways in commending Epaphroditus. They can become the substance of our friendship with one another.

He begins by calling him his **brother**. We can experience the intimacy of family as we share our spiritual lives together. He calls him his **fellow co-worker**. We are partners in the advancement of the gospel. Isn't it a lot more fun to work with friends? He calls him his **fellow soldier**. Spiritual warfare is real, but none of us have to go into spiritual battle alone as we face hostility towards our faith. We are brothers and sisters in arms, and the likelihood of us overcoming increases dramatically when we have someone by our side. He was a **messenger**, a sent one (same word as “apostle”) to bring news from Philippi. We are all in the news business, called to regularly preach the good news of the gospel to one another and share how it is advancing in our lives and in the lives of those closest to us. He was a **minister** to Paul's needs, literally someone acting in a priestly duty to bring a sacrifice of love to bless Paul. God has given us to each other to care for one another and bear one another's burdens in times of need.

What an opportunity all of us have to be that kind of friend in Christ, and this morning I rejoice because we already are in so many ways. This makes me immediately think of our Life Group leaders. We have asked more and more of them over the last few years. They welcome, shepherd, lead, care for, pray for, administer, mediate; and that's all between meetings! They are sacrificing on behalf of their brothers and sisters in their group and for the work of Christ. I think of our prayer partners and funeral teams; compassionate friends who minister to others in times of great need. I think of our STEPS table leaders and mentors who are standing shoulder-to-

shoulder with those courageous enough to dig into their junk and face together the spiritual and emotional battle that is likely to ensue. And this makes me think of a number of stories of people giving of themselves to another, whether it's a cancer survivor being a loving friend to someone going through cancer right now, or a stream of cards to a woman who is losing her husband.

Following the example of Jesus doesn't mean we have to put our lives at risk (though we may be called to that). It means we get to pour out ourselves, and maybe even suffer, for the work of Christ and for the welfare of our friends. It is a great privilege God has given us to be that for one another, and this morning I thank God for all the ways you all are doing that.

A Christian friend accepts the gift of Jesus for their own welfare.

I love this passage because it's as if everyone is trying to out-friend one another. The Philippians cared for Paul and sent Epaphroditus and a gift to him. Paul cared for the Philippians and sent two guys their way to care for and encourage them. Timothy cares for the Philippians and goes on their behalf. Epaphroditus cares for Paul, almost to the point of death, but is longing to go back to his people because they care so deeply for him and are concerned for him. But all of this would have been for naught if the gift of friendship wasn't received, if the attitudes of all involved were "I'm good." The reason this is such a moving scene is because friendship is joyfully given, and friendship is joyfully received. These are a bunch of people who love each other dearly and are pouring out their lives on behalf of each other.

How open are you to receiving the love and friendship of another? I was gently shown this week that I have a recent tendency to isolate. I'm not necessarily by myself, but I do have an inclination to show that "I'm good." Thankfully I have a dear friend in this church who won't allow that. When we talk, he'll ask me "How are you doing?", and then he'll shut up. So when I say, "I'm good", he just stares at me. It's not a condemning stare. It's an inviting stare that says, "Let me be your friend and care about you." That's when I begin to open up.

Something I have to remind myself, and maybe remind you, is that here, it's ok to not be ok. **One of the ways we can be a friend is to care about being cared about.** Caring for others is a pathway to joy for both parties. We can receive love and care and allow that joy to be experienced, or we can say we are all good and deprive us both of that experience. But if we choose to receive it, we acknowledge that God not only shows you how to be a friend, but that he has placed those people in your life as a gift. And if you struggle with that, let me close with some words from CS Lewis on God's hand in the gift of our friendships.

"In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years' difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of a topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting--any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding

one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others.” -C.S. Lewis

We are each a beautiful gift from God to one another. There are 1,400 people God has put in this church to be friends, and I am so thankful to be part of this group who love and care for one another like we do. We are a people who place the interests of Christ and each other above our own, and we sacrifice on behalf of one another. Let us continue to be the gift God intends us to be and let us continue to receive the gift God has given each of us in one another.