

JESUS IS MY FRIEND

Sermon by William Allen Zulker

I Peter 5:1-14

One of the books I have enjoyed reading is the biography of Dr. J. R. Miller, one of Philadelphia's most popular preachers a hundred years ago. He was a Presbyterian minister, serving as pastor of the Crossroads Community Church, The Bethany Presbyterian Church - founded by John Wanamaker, The Holland Presbyterian Church in Center city, and then the St. Paul's Presbyterian Church at 50th & Baltimore Aves.

St. Paul's Church started in a tent, and in fourteen years grew to a membership of almost two-thousand. During the 39 years of Dr. Miller's pastoral ministry - 5,341 people were received as members of those churches - an average of 137 new members each year. Simultaneously, Dr. Miller was first a writer, then became Senior editor of the Presbyterian Board of Publications for 32 years. He was responsible for many of the Sunday School and church publications that were sent across the nation and around the world. Some of them were: *The Westminster Teacher*, *The Sabbath School Visitor*, *The Senior Quarterly*, *Graded Lessons* and *The German Lesson Leaf*, - that's just a few of them. The total issue of the periodicals produced by the Board in just one of his years there - 1911- numbered 66 million 245 thousand.

Now to add to all of that, Dr. Miller wrote more than 60 books and booklets with titles like: Weekday Religion; The Building of Character; Secrets of a Happy Home Life; and The Secret of Gladness.

Following his death, the J. R Miller Presbyterian Church in Upper Darby, Pa was named after him, and I have had the honor of preaching there on several occasions as a guest minister.

To be sure, Dr. Miller was a most remarkable man! BUT- What impressed me most was not his accomplishments. RATHER - it was his manner of life, his service to others in their personal needs, his commitment to Christ, and his frequent statement: JESUS IS MY FRIEND! Repeatedly he said: JESUS IS MY FRIEND - JESUS IS MY FRIEND.

It reminds me of something I read in the Bible - I Peter 5:7 "Cast all your cares upon Him, for He cares for you." That was the word of Peter, the apostle of our Lord. Peter the disciple- who knew so well that JESUS WAS HIS FRIEND, TOO.

I don't know about you, but I like PETER. If ever I had the opportunity to meet just one of the disciples this side of Heaven - PETER would be my choice. He seemed to be so completely different from the others.

For example, we look at JOHN - the disciple whom Jesus loved so much - and we see that he appeared to be loving and compassionate, just the kind of person you would expect to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus. But not Peter.

MATTHEW, the tax collector, might also be of great help to the Lord in His ministry. Surely, there would be need for someone to take care of expenses incurred as they traveled about - and who better than one like Matthew who spent his life in handling money.

But PETER, that rough, rugged fisherman – who had spent his life on the sea among the smelly old fish and fishnets, what service could he possibly render to the one who claimed to be THE MESSIAH - THE DELIVERER OF THE PEOPLE?

Of what usefulness would he be? Or could he be? He seemed to be the most unlikely person to be chosen by Christ! To those who knew Peter, I imagine it was not only startling to hear Jesus call him, but more than that, it must have been surprising and shocking to see Peter respond.

Peter's friends must have laughed. His family probably considered him mentally unbalanced and very irresponsible in heeding the call.

What did it mean for this man to tear himself away from his life as a fisherman? And a very successive one, it seems!

When my wife and I were in the Holy Lands some years ago, we visited the town of Capernaum and saw the remains of the house where Peter lived. It was unusually large - a sign that he was successful in his trade. Why would he leave all that?

Can we not sense the gravity of his decision which meant that he would have to give up his only means of a livelihood in order to associate with a little known Rabbi - Jesus?

He also had to consider the feelings of his wife!

Then too, even when he became a disciple of the Lord, His behavior was strange. - HE TRIED TO WALK ON WATER! That reminds me of the title of Dr. Tony Campolo's book, *How to Follow Jesus Without Embarrassing God*. How ridiculous did that appear?

Also, it was at the Mount of Transfiguration that PETER foolishly suggested that he would build three tabernacles - one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. But he was rebuked from heaven above with a voice that said, "THIS IS MY BELOVED SON WITH WHOM I AM WELL-PLEASED; HEAR YE HIM!

In the GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE, where Jesus asked his disciples to pray, PETER fell asleep.

WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO THIS MAN? AND WHAT COULD BE EXPECTED NEXT?

If PETER were living in our day, we might expect him to throw in the towel and concede defeat. After all, wasn't he turning out to be a failure?

And look a step further.

On the Morning of the Resurrection of Christ we find PETER at the tomb, "stooping down and seeing the linen clothes laid by themselves" – BUT no Jesus!!! THE TOMB WAS EMPTY! What went through PETER'S mind in those moments?

Well, Luke tells us in Chapter 24, verse 22, "PETER departed, wondering in himself at that which had come to pass." It is a wonder that right then he didn't take his own life, for it would seem that his life without rhyme or reason. WITHOUT PURPOSE!

Even later on, when PETER stood face to face with the multitudes preaching the Resurrection of Christ and the way of salvation, the Jewish Rulers were anxious to destroy him! Everyone seemed to be against him. He was imprisoned by King Herod and then Crucified head downward - in pain and in shame!

If someone had asked Peter if life was unbearable. What would he have said? Did he think that life in its sorrow, pain and disappointments was of no value, meaningless and empty?

Some years ago there was a popular song that can still be heard on the "oldies radio station." Listen to the words.

"WHO CAN I TURN TO, WHEN NOBODY NEEDS ME,
MY HEART WANTS TO KNOW,
AND SO I MUST GO WHERE DESTINY LEADS ME.
WITH NO STAR TO GUIDE ME, AND NO ONE BESIDE ME,
I'LL GO ON MY WAY, AND AFTER THE DAY,
THE DARKNESS WILL HIDE ME!
AND MAYBE TOMORROW I'LL FIND WHAT I'M AFTER.
I'LL THROW OFF MY SORROW,
BEG, STEAL AND BORROW MY SHARE OF LAUGHTER....

Have you ever felt that way - wondering if anybody really cared?

Did Peter feel that way?

Well, listen to what he said as he found out that the only real way to face life was by HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP TO GOD - THROUGH HIS SON JESUS CHRIST.

Peter says, "CAST YOUR BURDENS UPON HIM - HE CARES FOR YOU."

He found out that you don't have to go it alone. You don't have to bear your burdens alone. You don't have to make your decisions alone. GOD CARES!

This is a Personal experience - An Individual experience - And one offered to each of us!

Captain Howard Rutledge, a United States Navy pilot, was shot down by the North Vietnamese during that conflict in 1965, and was held in prison there for seven and a-half years. In his book IN THE PRESENCE OF MY ENEMIES, he told of the unbelievable torture he experienced And he said that the lesson he learned while there was simply this:

"Seek God Here! This is where you'll find Him!" God does not forsake his own!

Many centuries before that, it was Augustine who said,

"God Loves EVERYONE as though there were only ONE of us to love."

And the Apostle Paul said, "THE SON OF GOD LOVED ME AND GAVE HIMSELF FOR ME."

My friend today, You and I can feel the same way - without any taint of pride or selfishness. And we can say, JESUS IS MY FRIEND!!

That reality was what changed Peter from being an ordinary fisherman - then a loser - and a failure - into a strong contender for the faith. He became the one, who every-time the names of the disciples are given in the Scripture, is at the head of that list.

He reached spiritual maturity and a stabilized way of life -

BY TRUSTING IN GOD AND KNOWING HIS CARE.

What an inspiring truth that is -

That God himself cares so much for us that He is willing to bear our burdens.

"CAST ALL YOUR CARES and BURDENS UPON THE LORD!

LET ME MAKE THREE OBSERVATIONS THAT ARISE OUT OF THIS VERSE

I. The truth of this verse is that

GOD CARES FOR US AS INDIVIDUALS

The Love of Jesus showed that God's love was not simply a Universal Love, spreading over the whole world - without reference to this woman, that man, this boy or that girl. The life of God the Son - in His Earthly Pilgrimage was one of innumerable contacts with individuals.

A. He was concerned about a woman whose body was racked with disease, and who pressed through the crowds to simply touch the hem of His garment and find healing. Jesus became her FRIEND.

B. We see Him walking the dusty roads of Palestine, encompassed about by the multitudes, when suddenly he stops. Far above all the surrounding sounds - JESUS hears the voice of a blind beggar crying out -

"SON OF GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME!" Jesus did and a new FRIENDSHIP began.

C. A Samaritan woman - hated by the Jews - a victim of prejudice and hatred not unlike that of our present day - suddenly came to know that JESUS WAS HER FRIEND when he stopped and talked with her at the well.

D. Even Zacchaeus, the publican - with his warped approach to life - found new hope and new life by the FRIENDLY visit of Jesus.

E. Simon Peter's mother-in-law was healed of her fever by Jesus, a FRIEND.

F. And a rich young ruler named Nicodemus, confused to be sure, yet, when face to face with truth, experienced the FRIENDSHIP OF JESUS.
HE CARES FOR US AS INDIVIDUALS !

II. This verse also convinces me that

GOD CARES ABOUT MY CHARACTER!

The reason is - that I am His Child! - He is my Father!

Now, I know that in these days, the ideals of fatherhood - of parenthood - of motherhood - are scraping the bottom of the barrel of morality and decency.

We are shocked as we read of parents who physically abuse their children in ways that are too terrible for us to describe.

We may even think that our Heavenly Father will act toward us as our earthly father, and we want no part of that.

But NO! We have reversed the order.

God does not determine his pattern of behavior after men.

Rather, He wants us to pattern our behavior after Him.

God cares about the character of His children.

Character is what you are when no one else sees you.

Character is what you say when you are alone!

Character is what you are within yourself - the true thoughts of your heart and mind known only to you and God.

And it matters to God whether one leads a holy life, a moral life, a decent life - or one that is immoral and corrupt.

It matters to God whether we win the fight for right, or lose the battle and yield to temptation.

It matters to God whether we are proud and haughty, or kind, loving and forgiving.

God the Father cares about the presence of sin in our lives.

He does everything possible to enable us to stand up under pressure and oppose the wicked one, as we read in I Corinthians 10:13. " No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way to escape, that you may be able to bear it."

III. GOD ALSO CARES ABOUT MY FUTURE,

Not one that is limited to this earth,
but one that may be spent with Him in eternity.

He cares so much that "He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have EVERLASTING LIFE." John 3:16

That's looking ahead! Into the future!

And God has prepared the way for you!

Is there any other FRIEND anywhere who cares so much for your future that they would be willing to make such a sacrifice as that?

No wonder that the hymn-writer wrote"
"WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS
ALL OUR SINS AND GRIEFS TO BEAR."

In conclusion, let me say this to you today:

This FRIEND - named JESUS - also wants to be your SAVIOR.

The frustrations and disappointments of everyday life need not be faced alone.

Oh, they will be there, you can be sure. No one can escape them.

But you have SOMEONE standing there by your side.

You need not worry about today, tomorrow, or the day after when you know that GOD loves you today.

He will supply the grace and constant love you seek, and need.

That is HIS PROMISE!

"His Hand is not shortened that it cannot save,
Nor His ear heavy that it cannot hear." Isaiah 59:1

So Remember This:

GOD CARES FOR YOU AS AN INDIVIDUAL!

GOD CARES ABOUT YOUR CHARACTER!

GOD CARES ABOUT YOUR FUTURE!

And NEVER - NEVER - NEVER FORGET -THAT JESUS IS YOUR FRIEND.

The hymn-writer Charles Weigel said it like this -

"I WOULD LIKE TO TELL YOU WHAT I THINK OF JESUS
SINCE I FOUND IN HIM A FRIEND SO STRONG AND TRUE,
I WOULD TELL YOU HOW HE CHANGED MY LIFE COMPLETELY,
HE DID SOMETHING THAT NO OTHER FRIEND COULD DO.

NO ONE EVER CARED FOR ME LIKE JESUS,
THERE'S NO OTHER FRIEND SO KIND AS HE,
NO ONE ELSE COULD TAKE THE SIN AND DARKNESS FROM ME,
O HOW MUCH HE CARED FOR ME!

That, my friends can be true of your life, too, when you accept Jesus as your SAVIOR,
your LORD, and your FRIEND.