

Sermon – Caring Joy
Sunday February 25, 2024

It was the summer of 2021 and our family was camping with some friends near Ottawa. Now our camping trips are always full of memories – and this trip was certainly a trip we'll never forget – but not in a good way.

You see, our kids were back at the campsite with our friends. So Jo and I decided to drive into town. But as we do, we soon find out there's a problem with our van – a big one.

Red warning lights start flashing. The van starts beeping. Smoke is billowing out of the engine. The car slowly starts to lose power until moments later it gives out and dies.

[PPT: Please show attached 3 photos full screen]

So here we are. We're on the side of a small country road. Our van is dead, we're 4 hours away from home, it's getting dark and it's starting to rain. Our kids are back at the campsite, we still have all our gear in our van and we have no way of getting home.

What would you do? Who would you call in this situation?

We planned to call CAA, but first we called a family member to let him know. And his response blew me away.

He said, Hey Jer don't worry, I'm coming over right now. I'll drive my van and I'll leave it with you. That way, you can drive it back with your camping gear. I'll just catch a ride back with CAA and sort out things with your van for you.

I was like, Hey you can't do that. It's a 4-hour drive here and a 4-hour drive back. Plus it's dark and it's pouring! I was just going to call CAA and sort it out.

And again, he said, don't worry – I'm coming over.

So we call our friends back at the campsite, they get us a ride back, then they drive us back later that night to meet our family member there. He gives us his van, waits for CAA to come and drops off our van with the mechanic for us.

Can you imagine having a friend who'd be willing to do that for you? This whole incident got me thinking, Who can you count on when you need help?

The Bible says a lot about why it's important to have a good friend.

**A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for a time of adversity. (Proverbs 17:17)**

**As iron sharpens iron,
so one person sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17)**

**Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:**

¹⁰ If either of them falls down,

**one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up...**

**Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.**

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:10-12)

We're in a series called *Journey Into Joy*. We're studying the book of Philippians which is a letter Paul wrote from prison. Philippians is known as the Epistle of Joy because in this letter, despite his circumstances, Paul constantly talks about joy. He mentions it over 16 times in this short letter.

Today we're talking about Caring Joy. Do you have friends who will be there when you need a friend? Are you a friend who will be there for your friends?

Please turn with me in your Bibles to our passage for today. Philippians 2:19-30.

In our messages so far on Philippians, we've been looking at some of the richest and most meaningful passages in the New Testament. We've been looking at themes like love, humility and unity. We've been looking at the example of Jesus himself who became a servant and died for us on the cross.

Today we come to a passage that's much more ordinary and mundane. Swiss theologian Karl Barth says that it contains no direct teaching from Paul. It's simply an update on his travel plans where he tells the Philippian church that he plans to send two of his friends to visit them.

But even though this passage feels more mundane and ordinary, it's an important one because it gives us a glimpse into Paul's personal life. We often think of Paul doing ministry by himself, but here in this passage, we see how important his friends are to him.

¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. ²⁰ I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. ²¹ For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³ I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. ²⁴ And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

²⁵ But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. ²⁶ For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. ²⁹ So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, ³⁰ because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

Philippians 2:19-30

So what's happening in this passage? Paul is commending two of his friends to the Philippian church. Who are these friends?

The first friend is Timothy. Many of you have heard of him. Timothy is the young man Paul met and led to Christ on his first missionary journey. He's become Paul's protégé and a leader in the Ephesian church.

The second friend is Epaphroditus. Doesn't his name sound more like a disease than a character in the Bible? Like hepatitis, meningitis, Epaphroditus. I wouldn't blame you if you don't know who he is because he's only mentioned twice in the Bible and both times are in Philippians.

So who's Epaphroditus? He's the one the Philippian church sent to care for Paul in Rome when they found out he was in prison.

Today we're going to unpack this passage, look at Paul's friendships with Timothy and Epaphroditus and talk about three qualities of a caring friend. What does a caring friend look like? How can we be a caring friend to others?

The first quality of a caring friend is, **A caring friend can be counted on.**

How many friends do you have on Facebook? According to Facebook, people have an average of 338 Facebook friends. That's a lot of friends. But are all of these friends, friends you can count on?

- Friends who will drive four hours to pick you up?
- Friends who will drop everything to help?
- Friend who will stick with you through thick and thin?

According to a 2023 survey, most people only have between one to four close friends. These are the friends on your short list, friends you can count on to be there for you.

So here's Paul. Sitting in a Roman prison. He wants to visit the church in Philippi but he can't because he's in chains. So what does he do? He decides to send two of his friends, two friends he can count on. But who will he send?

Paul knows a lot of people in Rome. In his letter to the Romans, he names 16 people by name. But since his imprisonment, many of them have abandoned him. They don't want to be associated with a man who might be executed out of fear for their safety and reputation.

On top of that, this is a big ask. The trip from Rome to Philippi is an 800 mile journey. This would be like you asking a friend to do you a favour by travelling from Markham to Fredericton, New Brunswick. Only they can't fly or drive. They have to walk. And this journey will take them 6 weeks.

So who does Paul think of? Who does Paul count on to help him at a time like this?

The first person that comes to mind is Timothy.

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon... I have no one else like him... Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. (Philippians 2:19-20, 22)

The word *proved* refers to something that's been tested and proven valuable. Paul isn't just hoping Timothy will be reliable, Paul knows Timothy will be reliable because he's spent time with him. They've lived together, served together and faced adversity together.

The second friend on Paul's short list is Epaphroditus.

I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus... whom you sent to take care of my needs. (Philippians 2:25)

How does Paul know he can count on Epaphroditus to make this journey? Because he's already done it. When others either could not or would not make the long trip to visit Paul in prison, Epaphroditus volunteered to do it.

So when Paul thinks of his shortlist of friends, the first two that come to mind are Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Who's on your shortlist of friends? Who can you count on to be there for you?

We all need friends we can count on. This past year, in this church I've seen so many examples of friends helping out friends.

- I've seen friends drive friends to their appointments, bring over meals, raise money for expensive medical treatments.
- I've seen friends support friends in times of crisis – helping to pack and move, providing a place for them to stay, offering comfort, love and support.
- I've seen friends help friends in times of loss – visiting with them, praying with them, crying with them.

The writer of Proverbs says: **Friends come and friends go, but a true friend sticks by you like family. (Proverbs 18:24, The Message)**

A caring friend can be counted on.

The second quality of a caring friend is, **A caring friend makes sacrifices.**

How many of you know someone who always makes it about themselves? They only talk about their stories and their problems and whenever the topic changes, they find a way to bring it back to them?

Put up your hand if you know someone like that?

You see, one of the biggest challenges to being a friend is making the friendship all about you and your needs. But Timothy's not like that.

Paul says that Timothy... **will show genuine concern for your welfare. ²¹ For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 2:20-21)**

Epaphroditus is another example. He put his life on hold to make the 6-week trip from Philippi to Rome. This was a long and physically demanding journey. It was a dangerous one too because he was carrying a lot of money. This made him a huge target for robbers and put his own life at risk.

So why did he do it? Because he wasn't thinking of himself. He wasn't thinking of his comfort. He wasn't thinking of his convenience. Who was he thinking of? He was thinking of Paul. He was thinking of how he could be there for his friend. He was thinking of how he could help. Because isn't that what a good friend does? They make sacrifices for their friends.

This past week, I was driving my daughter Abby to school and she turns to me and says, Dad, wanna hear something cool I read in my devos this morning? I said, Sure! So she reads this quote:

“Selfless love is always costly; fear can't afford it, pride doesn't understand it and friends never forget it.” (Bob Goff)

I thought about that for a moment and then I said, You know who totally fits this description? And then at the exact same time, we both said, Mom.

My wife Joanne is one of the most caring people I know.

- She checks in on people, prays for people, cooks for people.
- She visits with people, drop off gifts and food for people, writes notes to people.

And it's not like she's sitting around with nothing to do. She's super busy and she's always doing something. In fact, just thinking of her schedule and To Do list makes me tired.

So why does she do all these things for others when she already has so much on her own plate?

For Jo, it's easy. It's because she believes she's been put here to help others. She believes her mission is to help others feel blessed, cared for and celebrated. That's how she looks at her life. That's how she looks at her relationships.

You see, a good friend isn't just someone you have fun with; a good friend is someone who will be there for you – even...

- When it's inconvenient.
- When it's messy.
- When it's costly.
- When it requires time, energy and resources.

A good friend will gladly make these sacrifices – why? Because they're not thinking of themselves, they're thinking of others.

A caring friend makes sacrifices.

The third quality of a caring friend is, **A caring friend goes to battle with you.**

In verse 25, Paul describes Epaphroditus as, **my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier (Philippians 2:25).**

Paul uses three terms to describe his friend.

- He calls him his brother – because they are members of God's family.
- He calls him a co-worker – because they serve together in the church.
- But why does Paul call him a fellow soldier? They're not in the army, they're not at war.

Paul uses this term for an important reason. What do soldiers have in common? A common mission and a common enemy. When we become followers of Jesus:

You and I have a common mission - to advance the kingdom of God. Where there is brokenness and injustice, we're called to bring hope and healing. We do this in our homes, in our workplaces, in our community and in the world. We do some of this on our own, but we mostly do it together with God's people – the church. This is our common mission.

But we also have a common enemy. Paul says ...**our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 6:12)**

Satan is called the ruler of the kingdoms of the world. He's not happy when God's kingdom advances against his own - so what does he do? He attacks God's people. How does he do it? He uses lies and deception.

When you're facing suffering and adversity, he'll leverage these situations to make you:

- Doubt God's goodness and love.
- Think that you're not good enough.
- Get overwhelmed by discouragement and fear.
- Give up on God and his calling on your life.
- Destroy our unity and break apart our relationships.

That's why when we face suffering and adversity, we're vulnerable to the Enemy's attacks. He'll attack our hearts, our faith and our unity - why? Because he knows that if we lose hope, we'll be tempted to give up on God, on his people and on the mission he's given us.

When Paul was writing his letter to the Philippian church, the Roman army was unstoppable in battle. Why? Because they knew that soldiers fighting alone were vulnerable. So what did they do? They devised a brilliant strategy. Instead of having soldiers fight on their own, they had soldiers fight together.

Soldiers would stand together in what they called the Tortoise Formation. They would hold up their shields to form a wall at the front, at the back, on both sides and at the top. This way, the whole army was shielded, the whole army was protected.

As the soldiers went into battle, they would lock up their shields, form a protective wall and then march. And as they marched, they would sing songs as they advanced against the enemy.

This is the picture Paul gives us. He knows how vulnerable we are to the Enemy - especially in times of suffering and adversity. Because if you're seeking to follow Jesus, if you're trying to honour God, if you want to love others and make a difference— you're a prime target for the Enemy. You're vulnerable to his attacks.

That's why Paul calls Epaphroditus his fellow soldier. That's why Paul tells Timothy: **Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 2:3)**

Paul knows that when we're vulnerable when we fight alone but unstoppable when we fight together. So don't try to fight by yourself – stand with your friends, stand with your fellow soldiers, stand with those who will fight with you and fight for you.

- Friends who will encourage you and support you.
- Friends who will pray with you and pray for you.
- Friends who will remind you to Stand Firm because He who is in you is greater than he who is the world.

What do we do when we're living out God's mission and the enemy attacks?

We fix our eyes on Jesus. Then we stand together, we protect each other from enemy attacks, we sing praises to God. Then we move forward and advance boldly – why? Because Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail.

Turn to your neighbour to give them a fist bump and tell them, I've got your back, let's do this!

- A caring friend can be counted on.
- A caring friend makes sacrifices.
- And a caring friend goes to battle with you.

So where do we go from here? I'd like to share three applications.

First, **Be thankful for your friends.** Good friends are hard to come by so be thankful for the friends God has blessed you with. Thank God for them. Thank your friends for their friendship. In fact, I want to challenge you this week to send a message to a friend you appreciate. Send them a note to let them know what they mean to you.

Second, **Be a caring friend to others.**

- Be a friend who can be counted on.
- Be a friend who makes sacrifices.
- Be a friend who goes to battle with others.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The only way to have a friend is to be one."

Who do you know that's going through a hard time? Reach out to them this week and:

- Send them a message.
- Take them out for coffee or lunch.
- Check in on how they're doing.
- Encourage them, pray for them.
- Help them with anything they might need like a meal, childcare or some errand.

Third, **Be realistic about friendships.** When we're too idealistic about the friends we want, we get disappointed with the friends we have. Friendships take time to develop – so be patient. And remember that even the best of friends will disappoint you, misunderstand you and even fail you – and this will hurt.

Because we live in a fallen world and no one's perfect. But here's the good news.

- We have a friend that can always be counted on.
 - A friend who says, I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)
- We have a friend who has made the ultimate sacrifice for us.
 - A friend who says, Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13) And then he made the ultimate sacrifice for us on the cross
- We have a friend who's gone to battle for us.
 - A friend who having disarmed the powers and authorities... made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.^[e] (Colossians 2:15)

Who is this friend? His name is Jesus. He is the sinless son of God who came into the world to die for our sins. To give us new life. To give us new power. To give us a new mission to restore this broken world and to make it all God intends it to be.

And as we spend more time with the one who is the perfect friend – he helps us to become a friend to others.

- A friend who can be counted on.
- A friend who makes sacrifices.
- And a friend who goes to battle with others against our common enemy, for the sake of our common mission.

That's what Jesus has done for us and that's what he calls us to do for others.

So let's go into this week, joining our hearts together, protecting each other from enemy attacks so that we can move forward in the mission God has called us to. So that we can be a caring friend to those in need.