

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Great Hymns of the Faith

Sermon: What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Hebrews 4:14-16

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Sermon

This week, we begin a sermon series on a few of the great hymns of the faith. We did this a few years ago. I love hymns. I also love the new stuff. It should be a nice balance, I believe. The first Hymn in this series I want to examine is a classic - What a Friend We Have in Jesus. I know it's Pentecost. It's supposed to be the Spirit's Day. The Day the Spirit came to the Disciples in the Upper Room, the Birthday of the Church. I can see the Spirit yelling right now, It's my day, and you're talking about Jesus! He gets the other 51 weeks out of the year - just give me this one weekend! Maybe because it's too hard to sing, What a Friend We Have in the Holy Spirit. Thanks for wearing red, getting your Pentecost on, I promise we'll swing by later and let the Spirit jump on board the sermon train in a little bit.

What a Friend we have in Jesus. #526 in our Hymnal. The great American evangelist Dwight L. Moody, at the end of the 19th Century, incorporated this song in his sermons, writings, and teachings, which is where it gained in popularity. This caused many people to believe that the song is an American hymn. Not so. It was written by an Irishman in the provinces of Canada.

A century and a half ago two businessmen stood on a Port Hope, Ontario street corner as a little man carrying a saw walked by. One of the businessmen said, "Now there is a man who is happy with his lot in life. I wish I could know his joy. Perhaps I can get him to cut my winter's supply of wood."

The other man countered, "I know that man. He would not cut your firewood. He cuts wood only for the financially destitute and for those who are physically handicapped and cannot cut their own firewood."

That young woodcutter was named Joseph Scriven. Son of a captain in the British Royal Marines, Joseph was born in Ireland in 1819. After receiving his university degree from Trinity College in London, he quickly established himself as a teacher, fell in love, and made plans to settle in his hometown. A nice, simple, predictable kind of life. Then tragedy struck. The day before their wedding, his fiancée drowned.

Overcome with grief, Scriven left Ireland to start a new life in Canada. He established a home in Ontario, where he met and fell in love with Eliza Rice. Just weeks before she was to become Joseph Scriven's bride, she suddenly grew sick. And also right before their wedding, Eliza died.

A shattered Scriven turned to the only thing that had anchored him during his life — his faith. Through prayer and Bible study he found not just solace, but a mission. The twenty-five year old - got that, he's only 25 by this point, Scriven took a vow of poverty, sold all of his earthly possessions, and vowed to give his life to the physically handicapped and financially destitute.

Ten years later Scriven received word that his mother had become very ill. The man who had taken a vow of poverty did not have the funds to go home to help care for her. Heartsick, and feeling a need to reach out to her, he wrote the story of his life in three short verses he called "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Later, Scriven said, "The Lord and I together wrote the song." Several of his friends got a copy and one of them carried a copy to a music publisher. Within two years the little poem of inspiration had been published and coupled to a tune written by an American lawyer, Charles Converse.

He never would have thought that this song would have been famous. In 1869 Scriven published a collection of 115 Hymns and other verses that he wrote, which did not include "What a friend" Got that? He thought What a Friend was worse than 115 of his other works.

And when I think of Scriven, and all that he went thru, I think of Hebrews 4. The Language of a Great High Priest has really churchy language, but this book of the New Testament is there for us to understand that Jesus does get humanity. And he is fully divine. Our go-between between heaven and earth. Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

You spouse might not get you. Your kids might not get you. Your parents might not get you. Your pastor might not get you. You might not even get you. But Jesus gets you. He understands what's going on in your life. And if you need strength, he's there. If you need encouragement, he's there. If you need forgiveness, he's there. If you need that smack across the head, he's there, and then he's there with the healing touch. Indeed, what a Friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer! Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry. Everything to God in prayer!

Two decades later the great American evangelist Dwight L. Moody came across the song and believed it to be the most touching modern hymn that he had ever heard. It was Moody who gave the song a national platform and caused so many to think that the song had been written in America.

What happened to Scriven? Coincidentally, he drowned in a Canadian Lake in 1886 - just before his hymn became famous. Almost made it to 67. While alive, he never knew what his contribution to countless hymnals across the world would be. He would have been surprised if you would have told them his accomplishments in his lifetime and beyond!

You may never know your contribution. But the possibility exists for all of us to make a difference in the world. I think about the Disciples in the Upper Room! Sitting around, waiting for something to happen. They knew that the Spirit was coming, but honestly, I don't think they would have expected it as it did. You may remember the story - tongues of fire came and rested above each of the Disciples, and they began to testify - in other languages, languages they didn't know previously. They had the power to heal, the preach, to spread the good news! Never in their wildest dreams did they expect, not only what happened on that day, but everything else that happened in the weeks and years ahead. These people changed the world! When the Spirit moves, the Spirit moves! Sometimes because of us, sometimes through us, sometimes in spite of us. The Spirit moves thru the people of God for the good of humankind. They would have been surprised if you would have told them what they were going to accomplish in their lifetime and beyond!

You may never know your contribution. But the possibility exists for all of us to make a difference in the world. I think about our graduates - those who are going into the world to make their mark. I'll be honest - I didn't

believe the graduation speaker on that day I walked across the state - you know that speech - you will go off and do great things, you are the future. I didn't think too highly of myself. I sort of expected an average life, an average job, an average house, average kids - Great things? Have you seen my grades? Have you seen my social life? How can you expect great things from me if I don't expect great things of me? But the Spirit moves. When you live your life for God, you can find a lot of blessings along your journey. I'm surprised by what I've done in these 44 years. Maybe not write a hymn, but exceeded my own low expectations. I'm excited to see what these graduates do in their life - they ARE talented! They ARE special! They ARE smart! You may not know it, but let me tell you graduates: You just may be surprised if someone could tell you what you are capable of, what you can accomplish, in your lifetime and beyond. Let the Spirit move in your life - and find blessings along the journey. Good advice for the Graduates, good advice for us all. And the family of God said, AMEN!