

“A Life Worthy Of The Gospel”

Philippians 1:21-30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me;
and I do not know which I prefer.

I am hard pressed between the two:
my desire is to depart and be with Christ,
for that is far better;
but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain
and continue with all of you for your progress
and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly
in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,
so that, whether I come and see you
or am absent and hear about you,
I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit,
striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,
and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.

For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation.
And this is God's doing.

For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of
believing in Christ,
but of suffering for him as well —
since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had
and now hear that I still have.

A Life Worthy Of The Gospel

Philippians 1:21-30

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I.

What we have here, is a failure to communicate. That is the only way I can figure it. Do you remember that line in the movie Cool Hand Luke? Paul Newman, new to the hospitality of the southern prison system, is educated by the prison warden, played by actor Strother Martin.

“You get two sheets. Every Saturday, you put the clean sheet on the top... the top sheet on the bottom...and the bottom sheet you turn in to the laundry boy. Any man turns in the wrong sheet...spends a night in the box.”

II.

FAILure to comMUNicate. It is the only thing that explains Paul's tone in our sermon text from his letter to the Philippian church. A couple of years earlier Paul, himself, had established this church. Paul and Silas had just begun their second missionary journey, venturing onto European soil for the first time ever. During their first visit to Phillipi they had been treated quite harshly. They were beaten and imprisoned. However, they picked themselves up, brushed themselves off, and got back to it again; God bless 'em. I can only imagine that as they began to assemble the people who would, eventually, become the church, Paul was clear in explaining to them that the faith journey, this church thing, this commitment to Christ, is going to be very hard. It is going to be a struuuuugle.

III.

Now, a few years later, Paul finds himself in prison, writing to the Philippians trying to explain it all over again. Not so much in a *“I told you so”* kind of way, more like, *“now you see what I've been talking about.”* Paul is not angry, or frustrated. Instead, what he's saying, is *I hear you* my brothers and sisters. Remember, I have been there before and, now, here I am again. Paul lays it all out for them, with kindness, and compassion, and understanding, but in very clear terms. He writes to them and says, *“you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”*

He is trying to be tender, no question about it, and he pulls it off. That said, it also feels (to me anyway) as if Paul has come to a point of resolve. How else can you explain someone who states: "*Living is Christ and dying is gain.*" Pretty matter-of-fact; pretty much down to it.

IV.

Paul is not sure if he will ever get back to this church he loved so much, so he offers them this council:

Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.

I have been thinking about these verses all week. About what they might have meant to the Philippians, and about what they might mean to us here on the Park. Live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, stand firm in one spirit, strive side by side with one mind, for the faith of the gospel, and in no way intimidated by our opponents.

V.

Since Paul mentions it twice, let's start with the Gospel; the Good News of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Though you probably wouldn't think of it in these terms, today is a big day for our church; on a par with Christmas and Easter. On those occasions we celebrate the birth and resurrection of *Christ*. However, it is the birth and resurrection of our *congregation* which gets celebrated every September as we bless the children of our church and dedicate those who are committed to teaching them. *How*, though, do we bless them, and what, *exactly*, are we teaching them? The answer to both questions is the same: a point of reference, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, for Christians in all times and in all the world, the point has always been the cross, but it is the reference *to* that point which varies; sometimes greatly.

VI.

Perhaps those of you who are older share with me a similar experience growing up as a kid in your home church. Yes, we were taught the Gospel, but more as a way to avoid death and less as a way to live life. The result, at least to me anyway, felt more like I had been cursed rather than blessed.

Even though all the adults in worship, summer camp, youth group, and especially, church school, incessantly chanted about how Christ had died on the cross for the forgiveness of *my* sins, the reference to my life always seemed to fall mostly on my sins with only a cursory nod to their forgiveness. It was an insidious process, really, which had the effect of shifting the reference from the point of the cross away from the bounty of God's grace and more toward human works.

VII.

Now, no one ever came right out and said, "You better sit up and fly straight or you'll be damned to hell." Yet, the message was clear and, in many ways, worse. That somehow, and this is the insidious part, if I did not live my life in a manner which was sufficiently worthy the Gospel of Jesus Christ would somehow be diminished or, even, extinguished. As if that was even possible. As if *my* reference to the point could change the point. My guess is, that if you had a similar experience and yet find yourself sitting in the pews of this particular church, you, too, have had to work very hard in your own spiritual life to re-reference the point of the cross. To which I say, well done good and faithful servant. However, it begs the question, is having the *wrong* reference to the point better than having *no* reference at all?

VIII.

We now live in a world where a whole generation of people do not have a clue about the church, or anything having to do with Christianity. They have no reference to the point and, hence, no point of reference. Sensing at some level (sometimes articulated but more often just a gut feeling) that while the *point* is valid the reference being *made* to it is not. The parents of this generation kind of stepped away from their faith, and took a hands-off approach to religious education and experience (among other things) and now their kids are just lost. Moreover, the kids *know* it and they want to figure it out. I understand full well how the past few decades have seen people decide (or decide by *not* deciding) that they were too busy to re-reference their faith, or assumed that either it would be something they'd come back to (eventually) or it would be something they wouldn't need.

IX.

Turns out they are wrong on all counts. Now their children are faced with an ever increasingly confusing world hoping to make sense of it and, to their credit, trying to *live* a worthy life. However, the first question they are asking is, worthy of what? Worthy of the Gospel, Paul says. This is the point of reference, the center, the core, the tether which keeps us from being blown asunder by winds of fate and the meaninglessness of time. The fact is, people in every generation want to live life; really *live* it. We all want to get out there and take a big juicy bite out of all this world has to offer. But, if we don't know *why* we're living it, if we don't see the inherent *value* or the larger *purpose*, the big juicy bite turns to ash in our mouths.

X.

From our adult perspective, in blessing these kids today we make a bold claim that the battle is in no way lost. In fact, it has only just begun. More to the point, in blessing these kids we proclaim that the battle is *winnable*. That we, ourselves, have experienced the turning of the tide, from the desperate longing and soul-searing search for a point of reference, to the discovery of hope and the healing and wholeness that the Gospel has to offer. Our lives bear the truth of Paul's claim that living is Christ.

XI.

But, what about from the *kid's* perspective? What did *they* see today as they were anointed with oil, and set apart for a life worthy of the Gospel. I think that this morning, and every Sunday, our kids see a congregation, a community of faith, composed of a markedly diverse people all of whom have made the Gospel of Jesus Christ their point of departure into this world and struggle, each day, to re-reference our lives to it. People who know that this is *our* time, *our* moment, *our* church. Why else would we stand firm against all the world is throwing at us? Why else would we dwell together in the Spirit when it is the absolute hardest thing to do? Why else would we strive, side by side, with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Why else would we, in spite of all our differences, endeavor to be of one mind about living our lives in a manner worthy of the Gospel? *Because*, we've found a point of reference which rings true to us: a center, a core, a tether which keeps us from being blown asunder by hurricane-force winds of fate and the meaningless meanderings of time.

XII.

Our challenge, though, come hell or high water, is to not allow, or insidiously commit, *a failure to communicate* the importance of correctly referencing that point to our children, and to this world. There are so many opponents which would seek to intimidate us. However, more deadly than lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy or pride in their all their sundry forms is the sin of forgetting or forsaking the forgiveness of the cross. That our spiritual gaze is focused not on our human efforts to overcome our individual and collective sin, but that we have fixed ourselves on the atonement achieved through the cross as the ultimate expression of God's grace. True, the forgiveness of the cross doesn't mean we will not have suffering in our lives. As Paul points out in our passage: "*For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.*" Being a follower of Christ doesn't mean we won't have to spend a night in the box; or, many such nights for that matter.

XIII.

Sometimes the fires of hell get pretty hot, and sometimes the high waters which flood us with the cares and woes of this world get pretty deep indeed. Sometimes, it's just simply *our* turn to spend a night in the box. Sometimes it is our own actions and decisions which lead us to that box. Sometimes we are just standing in the wrong place at the wrong time, and through no fault of our own we find ourselves in that box. If there is one thing which 32 years of pastoral ministry have shown me, though, its that everyone, *everyone* takes their turn in the box. When we are in the box, though, when we are suffering, the hows and whys of how we got there really don't matter all that much...do they? Oh, they certainly give us something to think about while we're doing time *in* the box, but they offer no real way *out* of the box.

XIV.

Each and every Sunday, but particularly this Sunday as we set a part and bless these children, we offer a way *out* of the box. A means by which we can move through the struggles and suffering of this world, a purpose, path, and point to life which is appropriately referenced, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It isn't just oil and the sign of the cross we've placed on these children today, it is the blessing of hope we represent every time we gather and strive together to live a life worthy of the Gospel. Amen.