

“Goodness and Righteousness”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 1, 2023

World Communion Sunday

Psalm 145:1-8

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Philippians 1:21-30

Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians sometime around 60 A.D. He had visited the city a few years before during his second missionary journey and founded a church there whose members he regarded with "special affection and deep longing." Paul writes from prison, not knowing whether he will ever be released and allowed to visit his beloved congregation again. One might expect him to feel helpless, caged by his Roman captors, at the mercy of a capricious and corrupt empire, yet he writes with an extraordinary sense of freedom; rejoicing that, through the Philippian's prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, even his present situation will – as he says – “turn out for my deliverance.” Paul remains thankful and joyful despite his current surroundings and uncertainty about his fate.

How can joy flow through the same veins as suffering? The many serious issues that confront people in the present age put squarely before us the need for Christian practices that open up ways to experience joy that do not deny suffering, and ways to experience suffering that do not preclude deep and gracious joy. In this letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks from a place where joy and suffering converge; not in abstract thought, but in a Roman prison where he awaits news of his sentencing, to life or death.

Paul knows he will find a hearing among these Philippian Christians because they, too, have experiences of suffering and deprivation. Roughly a century before this letter was written, Philippi was the site of the final battle of the Roman civil war. The city was taken by Antony and Octavian, colonized by Rome, and the tillable land seized from the local populace and given to Roman military veterans. Paul's letter is addressed to a community of people who have known and continue to experience economic injustice and social ostracism. The letter does more than create a bond through mutual suffering; its point is to share the joy and confidence

of solidarity in Christ, while maintaining a clear-sighted awareness of their situation.¹

Both Paul and the Philippians share the experience of living under the rule of the Roman Empire. For both, the necessity of life is grounded in a connection to the community. Even if he lives, Paul argues, his life is “for the sake of” the Philippians. He is not just living for himself. Paul now lives for the others – for the sake of the community.

As the Christian theologian Howard Thurman reminds us, Jesus was not a part of the ruling class; Jesus, himself, was not a Roman citizen but was subject to the oppression and rule of the Empire. In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman describes all those who lack political power and status – like himself, a black American living in the pre-Civil Rights era – as having their “backs against the wall.” Jesus lived in solidarity with – and proclaimed freedom for – all who lived in poverty, under oppression, and lacked the privileges of citizenship. For those with their backs against the wall, the gospel is good news: for they, ultimately, belong to God and hold their citizenship not on earth, but in heaven.

Thus, Paul encourages the Philippians to live their life “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The Greek word translated “live your life” is related to the *polis*, or city; it has the sense of “live as a free citizen,” “conduct your public life.” Paul addresses the Philippian community as a whole, not just the individuals within it. Together, in their public life, they are to live as free citizens – not of Rome, but of God’s coming reign on earth. Such a life is marked by goodness and righteousness and, above all, by unity: “standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel and...in no way intimidated by your opponents.”²

Remember, Paul is writing to them from jail; his life, his future, is far from certain. The basis for Paul’s – and the Philippians’ – confidence is that “this is God’s doing.” It might look like Paul’s jailors are the ones in charge. It may appear that the Philippians’ opponents, whoever they are, are in charge. But no – God is in charge, and God is the Savior who, as Paul says later in this letter, “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself.” (3:21)

Despite the recent eleventh-hour stopgap agreement that prevented a federal government shutdown, we live in fractured times. Many of us do not often suffer

¹ Jane Lancaster Patterson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Susan Eastman

for the gospel – we are not confined to imprisonment or subjected to oppressive empire; typically, our backs are not against the wall – but Paul’s charge to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel” still resounds. His appeal calls us to a faith that is public, a witness that “strives side by side” with others for the gospel, and a devotion to Christ as Lord that governs all other loyalties.

Because we believe that, ultimately, God is in charge, we collaborate with other arms of the Christian church in celebrating World Communion Sunday and participate in the Peace and Global Witness Offering. In this way, we proclaim that all are welcome at Christ’s table – that there is room for everyone. Our mission and ministry looks to our neighbors near and far; to members of our local community who are in need, to our partners at North Church in downtown Cleveland, to the Dougbe River School in Liberia, and to all places in between.

Most of us don’t view the sacrifices we make to put others ahead of ourselves and to make their lives better as a privilege. Maybe on our best days we do, but – in between – we do our share of complaining. A colleague of mine once said, “I can handle almost anything as long as I can whine about it.” But here, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul isn’t whining in prison. Instead, he is giving thanks, and even takes it a step further – he is boasting. And the prospect of joining the Philippians into his boasting motivates Paul to keep faith even in prison.

Often, in auspicious circumstances, we wait for the right location to praise God. We want to serve God and to use our abilities to help others, but we prefer that it be under convenient or safe conditions. But, for Paul, that old real estate dictum, “Location is everything,” doesn’t apply. When it comes to selling houses and the success of restaurants, location is almost everything. But it makes little difference to Paul. He is able to claim joy wherever he is, despite the circumstances.³

And so, while he admits that he would almost prefer to die and be with Christ, Paul realizes that continuing to live and labor for the Philippians, even in prison, is better for them. Service in the name of Christ is foremost; location is secondary – this comes through loud and clear. Paul is determined that Christ will be exalted, whether in life or death. Paul can say thank you to God in prison because he has learned to set his focus on goodness and righteousness, on unity in Jesus, and his mission as Christ’s servant.

³ Alyce McKenzie from *Patheos.com*

For the church – then and now – the crucial question is whether essential or secondary aspects determine its identity. Especially for those who suffer, with their backs against the wall, there can never be too much focus on story of Christ and on the gospel of salvation through faith in him. Only when we hear the gospel message again and again; only when accept the invitation to come to the Lord's table to be fed again and again; and only when we reset our focus on ministering to others again and again will we be able to live our lives "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Those who are called *Christians* should always, again and again, strive to learn more about – and pattern their lives after – the person for whom they are named. Thanks be to God. Amen.