

To Live Is Christ – Philippians 1:21-30 – September 24, 2017

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Today we will be looking at a passage from Philippians. Philippians is an epistle, or letter. Letter writing was a common form of communication during the first century. The Apostle Paul was an avid letter writer. This was necessary because he traveled so much, and writing letters became a natural part of his ministry.

Paul traveled throughout the Roman world, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and building churches. Once a congregation was on its feet, with leadership in place, Paul could move on to another city. But Paul also understood the need to keep in contact with these fledgling congregations. Christianity was new and vulnerable. Just as we experience problems and conflict in our churches today, these young congregations had their own concerns. And so Paul kept in contact with them, by writing letters, by sending people to them, or even by occasionally coming back himself.

Paul wrote his letters to the churches with the knowledge that they would be read aloud during a worship service. But he probably would have been surprised to imagine that 2000 years later, people were still reading, studying and learning from his words. In his mind, he was simply writing a letter to specific congregation, with specific needs and concerns, and with which he had a particular relationship. As we read various letters of Paul, we can sense the different moods in them. We can get an impression of the type of relationship that he had with a particular congregation. In some cases, we can feel his compassion and his love and admiration. In other cases, we can sense his frustration, his anger, or his disappointment. Sometimes all those feelings were mixed within one letter.

Aside from a few stories in the Book of Acts, we don't know much about the community of faith in Philippi, but from the tone of his letter to them, it is evident that Paul had a close relationship to them. From the content of the letter, it seems that the Christians were facing hardships and conflict from the Romans, and their shared struggle helped forge the bonds between Paul and this church. As Paul wrote his letter to them, he was imprisoned in Rome and unsure of his future. However, his mood was one of rejoicing, he had no fear of what might come next. Whether he would eventually be released or face martyrdom, made no difference to Paul. As long as Christ was proclaimed and glorified, that's all that mattered to him.

Our scripture lesson today begins in verse 21. And here Paul is considering his future – whether he will live or die. He is torn between these two possibilities. He shares with the Philippians, "for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." According to him, whether he lives or dies, the message of Christ will be proclaimed. He does not shirk away from the possibility of becoming a martyr for Christ, a very real possibility. In fact, he says in his letter that he longs for death because he knows that he will be with Christ. After all these years of preaching the gospel, he desires to be with the one who has so shaped his life. Yet then again, he wants to remain alive in order to continue his work here. The mental anguish is evident in his words. He is torn between life and death.

His life as an apostle of Christ was full of hardship. Repeated imprisonments, physical and emotional abuse. Many years of struggle. And now from his bonds, he shares the most intimate thoughts of his heart to this congregation in Philippi. Of course, we might wonder, why does he even talk about this at all? He has no say in the matter. He is not in control of his destiny. When he goes to trial, Rome will either release him or martyr him. It's not his choice to make, yet he writes here as if it is.

But in a sense, it is. As he struggles with the possibilities of life or death, he has freed himself from any fear of the future. Death is not something to dread. For him, it would actually be a release from his struggles and a joy to at last be face to face with his Lord. But then again, he writes, to remain alive would allow him to continue his work. He realizes that his living would be beneficial to the Philippians, that he can go on nurturing them in their faith.

Now the question for us when reading these few verses, is what do we make of it? Is it meant to be normative for us as Christians? Is Paul modeling for us a position toward which we need to aspire – to look upon death as being desirable, to long for it even? I don't think so. Here Paul is speaking of his own unique circumstance. He is giving the Philippians, and also us, a sneak peek into his mind. To witness the internal struggle of his particular journey of faith at a particular point in his life. Our faith journeys are unique to each of us, so we may or may not get to this same point that Paul reached.

But then the mood changes in verse 25. Suddenly the ambiguity ends, and he realizes that he is going to remain alive, that he will be released, and his work will continue. So he goes back to that first thought of "living is Christ." He instructs the Philippians to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. And that message is for us as well.

As Christians, we belong to Christ in life and in death. In the Reformed tradition, that understanding goes back to the moment that we were baptized. At the time of baptism, God places a seal upon us by the power of the Holy Spirit, and from that moment on we belong to Jesus Christ. According to our Book of Order, "Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ." (W-3.0402) We belong to God, we do not belong to ourselves. That's what Paul meant when he said, "live in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ." In other words, live as if you belong to Christ.

Paul's specific message to the Philippians centered on the issue of standing firm and standing together in the face of opposition, strife and persecution. This young church was still getting flak from the Roman authorities. In order to survive and persevere, they needed to stand together and embrace the gospel, the message of Jesus Christ.

We don't face the kind of persecution that the Philippian Church did. Our beliefs about Jesus Christ, our worship in church every Sunday are not threatened by the local authorities. We have the freedom to express our faith without fear of harassment. So, what can Paul's message mean for us? What does it mean, "living is Christ"? How do we live in a manner worthy of the gospel?

We live in a time and place that is antithetical to the gospel that Jesus preached. Our society promotes materialism over simplicity and competition over compassion. We are defined by our successes and our possessions. Our society tells us to take command of our own destinies, to be our own persons, to make our own way. In the face of a society that encourages self-sufficiency and self-

reliance, and at times self-centeredness, it is hard to live a life worthy of the gospel. It is even harder when there are some Christians who embrace these dreams of worldly success, such as those who subscribe to the so-called "prosperity gospel."

But we also live in a time of great division, upheaval, and anger. The world is changing, more rapidly, it seems, than we can keep up. There are those who are scrambling to keep things "the way they were," but as the voices of those who are oppressed continue to ring out, we discover that "the way things were" is antithetical to the gospel. The messages of justice and equality that we Presbyterians are known to proclaim are getting harder to hear amid the competing voices shouting, "keep the status quo." It is even harder when there are some who identify themselves as Christians, but support a message of hate towards those who are different from them – those with a different skin color, or gender, or sexuality, or belief system.

Paul instructs the Philippians not only to stand firm, but to stand together. There's that idea of community again. The moment Christ claimed us at our baptism we became part of a greater whole. We were grafted into the Body of Christ. If we believe this, then it is easy for us to see how our choices and our decisions impact more than just ourselves. It's hard to live to "self" when we accept that we are part of a greater community, something much bigger than we can ever imagine. Our priorities begin to shift. We make choices based not on what is good for me, but what is good for the community. We learn to consider the needs of others as well as our own. We live as a collective "we" rather than a singular "I."

There is an image that Paul uses in this passage. He writes, "stand firm in one spirit, side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel." Again that image of community, but also the image of equality. If we're standing side by side, that means there is no one in front of us and no one behind us. The only one in front of us is Christ himself. He is the one leading us forward.

And then there's that idea of having one mind for the faith of the gospel. That doesn't mean we have to all be in agreement with one another about every little thing. He is referring specifically to the message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. That is what informs Paul's life, and is the goal for us. That we become so focused on Christ, that we cannot see anything except through him. The great Reformer John Calvin used the metaphor that studying the word of God was like putting on a pair of eyeglasses. When we put on those glasses, everything we see in the world, we see through those lenses. Everything we see, we see through Scripture. Paul is saying a similar thing. When we look out into the world, we should see the world through the eyes of Christ.

To live is Christ. For Paul, everything about his existence – his identity, his work, his suffering, his future – everything was wrapped up in Jesus Christ. And that is his goal for us. To live is Christ. To live in such a way that everything we do and say is impacted by our connection to Jesus Christ. As we have been claimed by Christ in baptism, Paul calls us to a life worthy of that claim. When people saw the Apostle Paul, there was no doubt that he belonged to Jesus Christ. What do people see when they look at us?