

To Live Is Christ...to Die is Gain

Philippians 1:21-30

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Paul might be the wrong person to turn to this morning. We are in the midst of a world where suffering and sadness, fear and futility, heartbreak and loss are impacting countless lives far and near. Puerto Rico dodges Irma and Maria swings by like a sledgehammer. Mexico gets a double whammy of earthquakes. Houstonians were flooded by rain and then flooded even worse when there was an emergency release of water from a reservoir. Nuclear tests from North Korea have set us all on edge as the threat of mass destruction hangs in the air. Because of all these things and more, and I do mean more, I mean private and personal hurts and wounds and disappointments and crushing burdens, Paul might be the wrong person to turn to this morning. In Philippians chapter one we find the great Apostle has landed in jail. He is in a lose/lose situation. If he lives, he lives stuck in jail. If he dies...well, he dies. That's the end of it.

What help is Paul going to be to us today in a world of hurt and despair? I guess he could say, "You think you got it bad...", and then give us a litany of his own trials and tribulations. It is not just that Paul is in jail. When he wasn't in jail he described himself in II Corinthians 4 as having a life that was hard pressed on every side, crushed, persecuted, struck down, and carrying around death in his body. In chapter nine of the same letter he goes on to lament that he has been flogged severely and exposed to death again and again, five times receiving forty lashes minus one, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked three times, in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from his own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, going without sleep, without food, without drink, even sinking to the humiliating place of being naked and cold. I guess Paul might be of help today if we came with our cares and concerns and he said, "You think you got it bad?" That could be of help, but if you have ever had someone say that to you, it isn't really helpful, is it? Paul might be the wrong person to turn to this morning. He is in a lose/lose situation. If he lives, he is stuck in jail. If he dies, well, he dies.

If Paul was indeed in a lose/lose situation, he probably would be the wrong person to turn to this morning. But the letter he wrote to the church in Philippi, and chapter one in particular, describes a person exactly as we just found him. He is in jail. He has come to realize he might well continue to live in chains. And he recognizes with utter realism that he could well die. That is his situation. And yet in the first chapter of the letter he wrote to the church in Philippi, to hear Paul describe his condition, he is not in a lose/lose situation. He looks at where he is in life and somehow he sees both his imprisonment and his possible death as a win/win situation. Faced with

imprisonment and/or death, he writes to his beloved friends, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:20, 21) In other words, it’s win/win.

If I die...I will be with the Lord. For so many, death is the end. Death is tragic. Death is a defeat. Death is loss. Death is disappointment. Death is despair. We are human, and we experience all of those feelings when there is a death. And we must leave time for death to have its sting. Death does hurt. If we ever doubt the pain it causes, there is our Lord Jesus weeping at the tomb of his beloved friend Lazarus. Death does have its sting. But through Jesus Christ, death is transformed from defeat into victory. The Apostle Paul is the one who wrote about the sting of death, and yet now that Jesus Christ has both died and risen to eternal life, Paul claims that the sting of death has been removed. Death is no longer the bitter end. We come to experience death as a transformation from life into life, to eternal life, to life with our Lord and Savior. That is how Paul comes to understand death as a win. For me to die is gain. I’m gonna be with Jesus. And it’s all good.

Now consider this. Not only is Paul going to be with Jesus in his death, Jesus is with Paul in his life. To live is Christ. At one point Paul, who took seriously the call to take your cross and follow Jesus, put that faith into terms that are powerful and prophetic. “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” Christ in me. Christ with me. Christ for me. Win/win. If I die I will be with the Lord. That is a win, a major win. If I live, well that is a win as well. Because Christ will be with me, right here in this life I live.

Even though death is no fun, I think we can understand how Paul would say death is a win. But how does Paul look at his life in prison, his life that included suffering and hardship, how does Paul look at his life as a prisoner and say that is a win? At least part of the answer is found in the first chapter of this beautiful letter to his beloved friends in Philippi.

“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.” (1:12, 13)

Apparently two things happened as a result of Paul being in chains, or being a prisoner. First, in a wonderful twist, Paul, the captive, had a captive audience. He had guards who watched over him all day long. It was their job to be there, to keep an eye on him, to monitor him. They had nowhere to go. They had nowhere to run. There was nowhere to hide. Paul had them with him all day long, and he took advantage of that. Day after day he witnessed to this captive audience. The image of this prisoner telling the gospel story night and day, in season and out, to those charged with

guarding him is priceless. As Paul says, by the time he was through with them the whole palace guard, and everyone else, knew that this prisoner of Rome was in reality a prisoner of Jesus Christ. That is how you turn being a prisoner from a lose situation to a win situation.

Not only was Paul a captivating witness for Christ, as other believers watched him and listened to him and learned from him, they became emboldened in their own witness. Others began to preach the word of God courageously and fearlessly.

Now this presented an interesting dilemma for the Apostle Paul. Some of those preaching were doing so out of envy and rivalry. We're not sure quite what that means, but perhaps they didn't want Paul to get all the credit, or all the converts. So they started preaching, but their motives were not pure. At the same time, others who were preaching were doing so out of love. Paul was aware of this, so you might guess he would tell those preaching out of false motives to knock it off. If your motives aren't pure, don't preach. But he doesn't say that. He says, "It is true that some preach out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former do so out of selfish ambition, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains" So what does he say about those who are preaching out of selfish ambition? His answer is a refreshing surprise. He says, "What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or pure, Christ is preached! And because of this I rejoice!" (1:15-18)

How do you turn a lose situation like being in prison into a win? The captive preaches to a captive audience. Others watch and they began to preach courageously and fearlessly. And even though some have false motives, something like that isn't going to throw Paul off his game. Fine, everyone preach. What does it matter? It just means more people are hearing the message. Paul is in prison, but it is not a lose situation. For him it is a win.

There is another win for Paul in being a prisoner, and it is not related to what is happening within the prison walls. Being a prisoner has brought to mind some who are far removed from the prison walls, but who are ever so close to the heart of the one in prison. From his prison cell Paul remembers his beloved friends in Philippi. His words to the church in Philippi are words that I hope every pastor takes to heart, words that I hope every pastor treasures, words that I hope every pastor has the privilege of experiencing in their own life. Being separated by prison walls and a great many miles, Paul finds the simple memory of beloved friends in Philippi is enough to fill his heart with emotions that are rich and warm. That's a win in its own right.

“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart. For whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory of God.” (1:3-11)

A memory like that, of people like that, in a partnership like that, goes a long way to bring hope. Paul finds himself closer than ever to the church in Philippi as he fondly remembers them. There are still a handful of folks who were here at Dunn’s Corners in the first days this congregation was coming to life. Joe Peacock was a seminary student at Yale Divinity School. He was called to come and serve as the first pastor of this church. I think it was 67 years ago. Apparently Joe was back in town recently and he was able to connect with some who knew him back in the day. I was talking with someone who saw Joe on that recent visit. Their face lit up as they recounted the wonderful memories from so many years ago. To have a chance to reconnect was a priceless gift for them. We hadn’t been here very long when one of the children in church told about a big surprise. He was playing in the front yard and a car pulled into the family driveway. He told me he watched with curiosity to see who was in the car. Then with a big smile he said, “It was Reverend Jim. I couldn’t believe it. It was Reverend Jim.” I have fond memories of my pastors when I was a child, and I can’t tell you how happy I was to realize this young boy will always be filled with excitement when Jim Glenn pulls into the driveway. That’s rich. When you receive the Scribe this month you’ll see a short article titled, “A Great Reunion.” In the article Art Ganz recounts how Dr. D, Dick Dannenfelser, was such an agent of healing for this church as the interim pastor in the days before Jim Glenn became pastor. And as we celebrate the ministry of Julia Fuller, so many of you have shared with me your stories of Julia was a pastor to you, how she taught and ministered in ways that were life giving and life changing. If you have fond memories of your pastors, imagine how your pastors feel when they think about you. “I thank my God every time I remember you...” Paul is in prison, but it is not a loss. It is a win, as walls and bars cannot keep his heart from remembering his precious friends in Philippi.

So for Paul, being in prison and facing death is not a lose/lose. It is all win/win for him. If he dies, he will be Jesus in glory. And if he lives, that means fruitful ministry, both behind the prison walls and on the streets of cities like Philippi and Ephesus and Corinth and Rome. They are both such good options, it creates a problem. He says, “I don’t know what I should choose.” Should I choose to die and be with Jesus? Should I choose to live and minister fruitfully? I don’t know. What should I do?

One of the commentators picked up on this dilemma of Paul, this statement, “I do not know.” He points out that in this passage there is a play on words going on about knowing and not knowing. Which leads the commentator to remark, “While Paul does not know whether to choose life or death, Paul does know some things—namely, that Christ will be glorified.”¹ Earlier in this sermon I said I wasn’t sure whether Paul was the right person to turn to this morning. There is so much to challenge our faith, what help is it to turn to a guy in prison, whose only alternative is death? I hope it was helpful to see how Paul turned what we might consider a lose/lose situation into a win/win. But now I want to hold out for you something else we can gain from Paul today. When we face the harsh realities of life, when we face suffering and pain and loss and disappointment and heartbreak, when storms ravage our world and leaders threaten and carry out war and destruction, when oppression and injustice and hatred and bigotry grab hold with a ferocity that seems to never yield, what Paul offers us today is powerful. He says, “I don’t know” about certain things. When a person of faith says “I don’t know”, it can be very powerful.

A passage I have turned to countless times is found in Deuteronomy 29:29, a small verse hidden among the many pages of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. After explaining a lot of things in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, there is this one tiny verse that says, “The things that are hidden belong to God, but the things that are revealed belong to us, to God’s children.” What a humble statement. There are hidden things, mysterious things, challenging things that take place along this trail of tears we call life. The hidden things belong to God. We just don’t know. But not everything is hidden. Some things are revealed. And those things that are revealed belong to us. Paul says there are things I don’t know...but then again there are things I do know.

Tapping into that reality that there are things we don’t know, I lift before you today some of the powerful things we do know as the people of God, as children of the Heavenly Father, as disciples of Jesus Christ. I want to tell you some things I do not know...and I also want to tell you some things I do know. I want to tell you some things we do know.

¹ Mike Graves, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, p. 89

- I do not know why there is evil in this world, why there is war, hatred, injustice, and oppression. I do not know why brother would raise his hand to harm his brother. I do not know why Cain murdered Abel, but this I do know: I know that God created this world good, that God shaped humans with his own hands, that God created us in his own image, and that God breathed into us his very own breath of life.
- I do not know why there is so much suffering and sadness, why hurricanes howl and earthquakes shake and lightning strikes and houses burn. I do not know why there are words in our vocabulary that raise fear in our hearts, words like cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, addiction, and depression. I do not know...but this I do know: I know that our God is not far from anyone who suffers. He sees, he hears, he is concerned, and he comes down to help. He has come down to be with us. He has become a human being. He wrapped himself in human flesh. And instead of living in a bubble he touched, he wept, he was wounded, he bled, and he bore the scars. I don't know why life wounds us in so many ways, but I do know that when the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord lived on this earth, he was the Man of Sorrows, well acquainted with suffering and sadness, and he was wounded. And I do know that in a miracle of God's redemptive grace, by his wounds we are healed.
- I do not know why there are divisions in this world...why there are wars...why there is prejudice, why people create so many false gods and worship at the throne of idols, why people put their faith in money and materialism and pursue fame and fortune, success and selfish goals, only to see the storm of life sweep these empty things away. I do not know why humans turn from God. I do not know...But this I do know. I know that God has not turned away from humans. He who said, "I will never leave you and I will never forsake you", keeps his promise. I know that the Apostle Paul, who was spending his days in a dark prison cell knew he was not alone. I do know that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God that has been given to us in Christ Jesus.
- I do not know why the Son of God had to suffer, why he was betrayed, why he was hung on a cross to die. I do not know...But this I do know. I know that when Jesus suffered and died, his suffering and death achieved something incredibly good for humanity...it secured a new beginning for us, it opened the doors of salvation, it defeated the powers of sin and evil, it rescued us from empty lives with false gods, and it redeemed our lives and bought us back at a great price.

- This I do know...one day there will be a mountain that everyone will stream to. It will be the mountain of the Lord. Jesus will be there, sitting on a throne, welcoming all his children to their new home in God's new creation where every tear is dried and every wound is healed, where every relationship is made right, where every heart is pure and every song is joy. I do know there will be a day when every action is love. And I know that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

I hope and pray that today Paul was just who we needed to turn to. I hope that a man sitting in prison with his only alternative being death, I hope a man sitting in prison who is able to say "It is a win/win", I hope that is just what we needed today. And I hope that hearing him say even though there is plenty we do not know, the things we do know, these are the things we cling to and these are things that set us free to live with joy, with hope, with confidence, and with love.