

Striving Side by Side

Text: "...I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel..." Phil 1:27b

The Apostle Paul didn't write a Gospel, he wrote letters. And of all his letters, this one, before us today, the Letter to the Philippians, is the most personal and affectionate. One of the things that distinguishes it from the others is its note of joy-which is ironic since he was in a jail cell at the time. Scholars who study such letters from the first century say that it is a "typical letter of friendship, written to strengthen the bonds of affection" (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol.4, pg.87*). Paul really likes this congregation! After all, he helped to start that church which at the time of his writing had about 50 members.

One purpose for the letter is to thank the congregation for their generous care for him, by way of a visit by Epaphroditus who came bearing gifts.

The church existed in a very hostile environment because almost all the other citizens, in that rather large city, were Roman citizens who hailed Caesar as Lord, not Jesus. In fact it was against the law to be a Christian.

This helps explain the situation of Paul. He wrote this letter from a prison cell. He had been arrested for preaching the Gospel and for living his life according to the Gospel, which would mean after the manner of Jesus, who taught and showed us what it means to love one another.

It reminds me of *The Letter from a Birmingham Jail* written by Martin Luther King, Jr. who as we know had been arrested during the civil rights movement for

protesting the segregation laws. The Black Lives Matter movement carries on this tradition with their non-violent protests.

Today and next week, we'll be looking at a couple of passages from this charming letter which could be renamed, "A Letter from a Roman Jail".

Another purpose for the letter was to reassure the Philippians, whom he considered 'partners in the gospel' that even though he was in jail and the situation was precarious, he was okay. Why? Because he knew that he was doing what God wanted him to do: share the gospel of

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God's love in Christ from which nothing, not even death, could separate him. He also knew that even though they were apart, they were deeply connected by the Spirit.

This year, as we all know too well, has been quite the year. A year that, in many ways started out with such promise but then quickly morphed into a nightmare for some and a significant challenge for most. The combination of Covid 19, the tragic loss of black lives, like that of Breonna Taylor, and the devastation caused by extreme wildfires has caused the shaking of foundations. The anxiety levels have risen considerably.

In such a time as this, the written words of Paul's letter are truly an encouragement to us. He assures us, as well as the Philippians, that come hell or high water, God is for us, not against us; that God is our refuge and strength—a very real and present help.

Paul's words capture the irony of a man held in captivity, who, nevertheless, reveals such joy and such a remarkable inner freedom. I am reminded of a quote by Victor Frankl in *Man's Search For Freedom*.

"The last of human freedoms-the ability to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances"

That's key! Not only for Paul, not only for the saints in Philippi, but also for the saints in Blue Hill!

In this season of the coronavirus, with the subsequent restrictions of the CDC guidelines, the circumstances of our lives have changed dramatically, some lives more than others. One of the many changes for most of us is spending more time at home, whether we're working remotely, or doing school remotely. According to the recent issue of *Parade* magazine "America's New Normal" states that 55% of Americans have reported an increase in mental health issues. Quite a significant number are depressed. (*Parade*, 9/27/20) We're all experiencing more grief right now because of different kinds of losses, including the loss of jobs for so many. Yet regardless of the circumstances of our lives, we all have the freedom to choose what our attitude towards this pandemic will be.

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Will we face the challenges cynically or hopefully? With rudeness or with kindness? With despair or hope? We get to choose our attitude.

We also have the freedom to choose how we will respond the challenges we face: will we choose life and make the most of the situations we're in to do good? Will we choose love, and continue our lifestyle of caring and being there for one

another which is the hallmark of Christian living? That is, will we do as Paul exhorts the Philippians to do: “live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ?”

In that same article from *Parade* I mentioned earlier, I read that 62% of Americans have adopted at least one healthy change during these past 7 months. Very positive choice for life.

I also read a wonderful article recently in the Bangor Daily News. It was co-authored by Rev. Marvin Ellison and a team of faith leaders including a Rabbi and a Muslim scholar.

Standing firm in one spirit, these leaders presented a view on freedom from an ecumenical faith perspective. Let me share just a part of this:

“..our traditions lift up a more expansive, more demanding notion of freedom than the liberty to do as one wishes, regardless. True freedom is the freedom to be with and for one another, to care for others as oneself, and to act lovingly, justly, compassionately toward all. Spiritually sound, morally principled freedom is the freedom to be responsible and serve humbly rather than claim special privileges or exemptions for oneself or one’s closed community”

(BDN, 9/16/20 pg.A7)

Paul goes on to guide this dear Philippian church by encouraging them to simply be the church in spite of the challenges they were encountering, trusting the promises of the Gospel, one being this promise from Jesus himself who speaks these words to his closest friends on the occasion of the Last Supper:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33)

4.

Followers of Christ will never be immune from suffering any more than Jesus was. One reason is because caring for others in the manner of Jesus is to have compassion upon those who are hurting. And by definition compassion means willingly sharing the suffering of others. That is part of what it means to be a neighbor to someone in need.

But we do this, not just as individuals, but together. Paul lifts up the importance of togetherness with these words:

“Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that ... I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel...”

The image is from the field of sports and the idea is of working so closely together as a team that together you are acting as one player, with a common purpose that is an integral part of the purposes of God. The expression, standing firm in one spirit, is an uncommon expression from that day, unique to Paul. Scholars agree that he is thinking of the true spirit of the church community, the Holy Spirit!

One song that this passage brings to mind was popular in churches when I was young. *They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love*. It is often referred to as a contemporary hymn, but it was written in the 60's. It was written and composed by a Catholic priest by the name of Peter Scholtes, “to address the racial

differences in his parish at St. Brendan's on Chicago's south side. St. Brendan's was going to host an interracial and ecumenical conference. As he began to prepare for worship, he couldn't find a hymn that spoke to the occasion. So he sat down and composed one himself.

"We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord, we are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord, and we pray that our unity may one day be restored; and they'll know we are Christians by our love by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our Love".

Amen.