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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 20, Series A (Pentecost 16)
Saturday, September 23rd, 2017
Sunday, September 24th, 2017

Sermon: To Live Is Christ

Text: Philippians 1:14-16, 19-30

Focus: Christ is with us in life and death.

Function: That Christ would be glorified by their life and death.

Structure: Verse-by-verse?

Locus: “We pray in this petition, in summary, that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven” (SC, Seventh Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:2, ESV).¹ Amen. Today’s epistle lesson is difficult for us to wrap our heads around because Paul’s context is so far removed from our experience. From a jail cell in Rome, the apostle writes to his fellow Christians in Philippi, where, some 10 years earlier, he established a church (Acts 16:12-40). He writes to thank them for their ministry support and “partnership in the gospel” (Phil. 1:5), as well as for certain unspecified gifts they sent to supply his needs (4:18). But more than that, he writes to encourage them so they will not worry about him in his present condition.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is often called the Epistle of Joy because of Paul’s warm, joyful tone throughout. The words “joy” and “rejoice” occur 14 times in this short letter, most famously in the last chapter: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!” (4:4). And that surprises us. What in the world did Paul have to be happy about? After all, he was locked up in jail, persecuted for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Roman prisons did not have any of the creature comforts that modern prisons have, such as gymnasiums, recreation rooms, full

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

libraries, or television. True, prison is no picnic, as I can attest from having visited several people in prison throughout my ministry. But prison was a nightmarish existence in Paul's day. In another prison letter, Paul expresses loneliness and begs for his coat to stave off the cold (2 Tim. 4:9-13).

But Paul is not normally one to grumble and gripe about his circumstances. He had learned to be content in any situation (4:11-12), and he knew how to put a positive spin on it. He writes, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ" (Phil. 1:12-13). Rather than a blow to his mission, Paul's imprisonment actually provides opportunity for a very special audience to hear the Good News that otherwise might not, for even Caesar's personal bodyguard and members of his own family hear about Jesus because of Paul's chains (v. 13; cf. 4:22). Paul is not a petty criminal or notorious killer. He is in chains for Jesus. And rather than being a setback for the Church, the Gospel continues to advance and marches forth!

Sometimes we get discouraged when we suffer for the name of Jesus. When people ridicule our faith, we are shamed into silence. Or we bewail problems in the church only as impediments to ministry. For example, many churches suffered terrible property damage in the recent rash of hurricanes along the Caribbean and Gulf Coast. But rather than despairing and focusing inward, many of those congregations have mobilized to minister the needs of their neighbors. And so the Gospel advances!

Paul's attitude reminds me of another Biblical figure who suffered false imprisonment: the patriarch Joseph. You may recall that Joseph was kidnapped and sold into slavery by his brothers, wrongly accused of a crime, and then, by God's grace, rose to a prominent position of

leadership in ancient Egypt. Years later, when we finally met his brothers again, Joseph could have punished them, but instead he forgave them, saying, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:19-20). Many people in Joseph’s situation might have given up hope or become angry and bitter for the rest of their life. But instead he saw the hand of God working in even the worst situation to bring about a miracle.

Martin Luther, the founder of our movement in Christianity, lived most of his life with a bounty on his head. At one point he had to be held in protective custody because so many people were trying to end his life. Kings and emperors (e.g., Henry VIII and Charles V) issued edicts and papers against him. Popes published bulls banning him from the Catholic Church. Luther could have kept quiet and stopped preaching and writing. He could have lost his sense of humor and withdrawn from his friends. But instead he doubled down and worked even harder. In one of my favorite Luther quotations, he said:

“I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word: otherwise I did *nothing*. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my [friends], the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all” (Luther’s Works, emphasis added).

So also with us. Whether in good times or bad, we read, preach, teach, and share the Good News of God’s love and mercy in Jesus Christ, whether people listen to us or not. The Word goes out, and the Gospel advances!

In fact, Paul’s imprisonment had a most surprising effect on the Church’s mission. You would expect that other missionaries might keep quiet, fearing that Paul’s fate might befall them. Instead, Paul reports, they were “much more bold to speak the word without fear” (Phil. 1:14). They stepped into the breach and carried the torch, picking up the work where Paul left off, and so Christ was proclaimed (v. 18).

So Paul rejoices and assures the Philippians that everything will “turn out for [his] deliverance” (v. 19). Paul seems to play on words here. The literal Greek word for deliverance is “salvation.”² What does Paul mean by this? Does he mean that he is confident he will be freed and “delivered” out of prison? Or does he mean that his deliverance will be death, his salvation and entry into heaven? It’s hard to say for certain, and maybe Paul himself does not know. He seems to wrestle and vacillate between two very different hopes.

“As it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or death” (Phil. 1:20). Paul certainly seems to be aware of both possibilities: freedom or execution. But he fears neither outcome, for he knows that either way, “Christ will be honored” and God’s will be done.

Very often when we are in troubling circumstances, we frantically pray only that God would deliver us out of trouble. But sometimes God’s will is not to rescue us *from* evil but to walk with us *through* evil. After all, when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, we ask, “*Thy* will, not *my* will be done.”

Then in one of his most stunning assertions ever, Paul declares, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). This verse shocks us. Again, we would expect that most prisoners would yearn only for release and seek to avoid death row at all costs. The idea that either way is okay would strike us as Stoic resignation or even a mental disturbance. But not Paul. He knows that his life is hidden in Christ (Col. 3:3). As a Christian, whether he lives or dies, his purpose is to honor and give glory to God. Paul does not fear death because he knows what awaits him: the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8) and the full presence of Jesus. Indeed,

² Greek: *sōtēria*.

those are the promised reward and inheritance for all believers in Christ (Rev. 2:10). No wonder, then, that he can say that “to die is gain.”

As Christians, we do not fear death. True, death is our enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). But Jesus has destroyed the power of death and the grave by rising from the dead! Rather than something to fear, death is something that Christians can face with quiet trust in our Savior. All this reminds me of a line from one of my favorite hymns:

*Teach me to live that I may dread
The grave as little as my bed.
Teach me to die that so I may
Rise glorious at the awe-full Day.*³

Paul continues. “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 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 on your account” (Phil. 1:22-24). Paul knows that it’s better for the Philippians, his followers and friends, if he is finally acquitted at his trial before the emperor. Nobody else in history had the missionary impact of the Apostle Paul. A longer life means more work, “fruitful labor” for the kingdom of God. But Paul admits, euphemistically, that he actually wishes to die: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ...” (v. 23). Paul was getting old. His eyesight was failing him (cf. Gal. 4:15; 6:11). His body was weak and broken by beatings and stoning and other forms of persecution. Paul was tired, and he was ready to be at rest with the Lord.

Do not misunderstand the man. Paul was not depressed and actively seeking his death. He wasn’t suicidal. It would be wrong for us to misquote him and use the verse, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain” as some kind of twisted justification for euthanasia. No, Paul simply

³ Thomas Ken, “All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night,” in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 883:3.

meant that he had done the work Jesus called him to do. And when his time came, he was ready to meet his maker. He had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:7).

The yearning that Paul expresses here reminds me of the humble faith of one of our homebound members. Oftentimes, as the elderly become frail and are not able to make a “meaningful contribution,” as society imagines it, they can become lonely and depressed. They may even wonder about their purpose in life and lose interest in the day-to-day, longing only for the grave. But one woman, Doris, surprises me with her joy and hope. Even though Doris is 93 years old and suffers many chronic pains, she doesn’t let them get her down. She once told me, “Pastor, I don’t know why the good Lord still has me here, but he must have his reasons. Obviously, there is still work for me to do.” Nobody’s life is meaningless or without worth. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). And whether you’re 9 days old or 90 years old, God has a plan for your life. As Paul said, it’s better for other people for us to stay alive, because that “means fruitful labor,” even if that labor is nothing more than praying for our friends and family. Some of the mightiest prayer warriors I know are old men and women who can barely get out of bed. But they can still do the heavy lifting in God’s kingdom by lifting up their hands and voices in prayer.

So Paul encourages the Philippians—and us—not to lose heart. He commends us to strive “side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27) and not to be frightened by our enemies, who even if they do us their worst, cannot destroy us (cf. 1:28). “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe but also suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). Paul reminds us that faith is a gift. Salvation is not won, but “granted” (v. 29). God’s grace is a gift. And so is the opportunity to suffer for the sake of Christ. We do not

normally think about suffering as a gift, but remember St. Paul and Joseph and Martin Luther. They suffered for the name of Jesus, and the Lord blessed them. The Word went out, and the Gospel advanced. And when they died, they were welcomed into eternal dwellings, enjoying the rich reward of their Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, do not be afraid, no matter what the devil, the world, and the flesh may throw your way. They can take away your name, your reputation, your property, and even your life. But they can never take away your salvation. And they can never snatch you out of the hands of Jesus (John 10:28-29). Rejoice, dear friends! For to us, to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.