

Sermon – September 20, 2020
“Dying Is Gain”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Philippians 1:21-30

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good morning! Welcome to the last Sunday of summer. I suspect that we have all noticed the oppressive temperatures of summer have given away to the cool nights and days of the coming fall. Anyone turned on your heat yet? It will not be too long before we will be moving those thermostat switches from cool to heat.

I would like to take a moment to celebrate that we have completed the development of our leadership for 2021 and are almost ready for our Charge Conference on October 3rd at 5:00 p.m. via Zoom. I am planning to be at Fairfields for the Zoom meeting. If those who are not “zoomies” want to attend, please come and join me. It will be a Zoom conference and the link to join is in your email. Let me give praise to God for all of you who have agreed to be part of the leadership of the church as we move forward to share the gospel in the coming year and for all who have served in the current year. Pray that we will be effective in our labors on this mission field.

I think we should also give praise to God that Hurricane Sally left us with only some rain and a little wind. We need to be in prayer for those who were not as fortunate. I also want to continue to celebrate what we are learning in the Bible studies and to encourage you to come and join with us as we get our Old Testament closets in order at Fairfields on Thursday mornings and as we wrap up our study of Romans at Afton on Tuesday evenings. Finally, I want to thank you all for standing as you are able when we read the scriptures. I know that it can be difficult for us to be up and down so much, but I find it changes the way we hear the ancient word of God when we give honor by rising when it is read.

Let me give just a little background on first century Philippi as we begin our look at this morning's Epistle reading. Philippi was a Roman colony that was established during the Roman Liberators' civil war that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar. On the plain to the west of the city, the Battle of Philippi was fought where the forces of the assassins fought with the forces of Caesar's heirs. Caesar's heirs prevailed and some of the victorious warriors were settled in Philippi, establishing a Roman colony. The city was a rich source of gold from the mines in the mountains, and as a Roman colony, those who lived there would have worshiped the Roman gods and held that the emperor was god. It is in this environment that the little church at Philippi was trying to grow and its members were persecuted by their Roman neighbors as they worshiped the one God instead of the emperor with their Roman neighbors.

Paul uses a very powerful statement about his faith in the letter. He states that "living is Christ and dying is gain." We should stop and think about what he is saying. Paul is also in a Roman prison, waiting a tribunal's ruling deciding if he will be executed or set free. As he waits and writes to encourage this little flock at Philippi, we catch a glimpse of the focus of Paul's life, Jesus Christ. It is not as if Paul is contemplating a choice here. That will be made by a Roman judge. Paul's statement is that if he is allowed to live, then he will live for Christ and that his life will be dedicated to spreading the gospel. If he is to be executed, then that is not sadness for him, but gain. He will be in the very presence of Christ, his life's desire and hope. Paul is uncertain of which will be better for him, and as he writes, he states that he is struggling to decide. He does decide that to be able to be an encourager to the church at Philippi would be a better outcome, but he is not at all hesitant to find joy in death as he would be with Christ.

My goal this morning is not to have us compare ourselves to Paul, but to stop and to think about how we seek to live a life in Christ. Do we think of Christ as Paul does? Is our life's desire and goal to be in labor for Christ or to be with him? Are we unafraid to die, as we will be reconciled to Christ? If we will honestly look at our culture with these questions, I think we can quickly make the case for a culture that is focused on staying alive, of living as long as we can. And I think if we are honest, we will find ourselves closer to keeping Christ under our beds to bring him out in times of a need or crisis to get from him what we desire and then putting him back under the bed until the next time we need help.

Paul's view of a life in Christ is radically different. Life for Paul is singularly focused on sharing the Good News, and once those who respond to it believe in Christ, Paul seeks to build

them up so they may progress in joy and faith. His life's goal is to share Christ with as many people as he can, even Roman leadership who worship an emperor and may possibly execute him for his work for Christ. Paul's aim in life does not change based on where he is. He will serve the gospel and spread it wherever he is able. The average Methodist today has the statistical trait of inviting someone to church once every thirty-four years. Not sharing the gospel, just inviting someone to church. That does not seem very Paul-like to me. The image I have for Paul is one totally focused on Christ and either wanting to be sharing the Good News with people or wanting to be in the very presence of Christ. Paul has caught a glimpse of who Jesus is, the Messiah, the son of God, the source of living water that flows forth as steadfast love into and out of those who believe in the risen Lord. And, as a result, Paul is totally focused on either serving the gospel or being in the presence of God with Jesus. What about us? Have we caught a glimpse of Jesus? Are we living for him? Methodists once invited people into a relationship with Jesus so much it changed the course of history as people came to know Jesus Christ and strove to live in holiness. They invited so many people into a relationship with Christ that there was no revolution in England as there was in France. In the words of the song we sing each year at Annual Conference, "Are we yet alive?" Are we living for Christ? What holds us back? Fear? How many times have we been persecuted for sharing the gospel of Christ? Look at our prayer list. How many people in our congregation, in our denomination, are we praying for because of their suffering for sharing the gospel of Christ? Are we yet alive?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul decides that the best course for him would be to remain alive and to travel to Philippi and help the Philippians progress in joy and faith. He wants them to grow into a people of God whose lives are lived in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. When I read those words, "live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" it makes me stop and wonder, "Do I live that way? Is my total focus in life to live as one who is worthy of the gospel of Christ?" As I think about those words, I am uncertain that my life is conformed to this idea. Am I totally sold out for Christ? Is my every moment, all my strength, soul and might focused on the gospel of Christ? I know that Paul's life seems extreme in his devotion to Christ, but do I have any of what Paul has in my life? Do we? Can we have such a focus? These are tough questions. They should drive us to cry out in prayer, "O Lord, is my life being lived in a manner that is worthy of what you have done for me?" And as we consider how to live like Paul, we need guidance on what it means to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Paul does give a lot of guidance to us in his letters for lives that are being lived in a manner that are worthy of the gospel of Christ. In this letter, he gives three quick characteristics that should be present if he comes to the church in Philippi. First, he expects the Philippians will be found standing firm in one spirit. This one spirit is the Holy Spirit, whom we are to have a deep personal relationship with and are to be guided by into living for Christ. We as the body of Christ should not be seeking to hide who we are and what we believe, but we are to be standing firm in the knowledge of the gospel that Christ died for our sins, that we are forgiven, that Christ's love rules in our lives and that our aim, like Paul's, is to be those who are guiding others to progress in joy and faith. We are to stand firm in what all Christians have believed for all time and not allow the winds of the culture's desire to be our guide. We are to be those united in one Spirit standing firm and guided by the Holy Spirit into a body who loves others more than self.

Paul also tells us he expects to find those at Philippi striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. For Paul, there is no debate about what it means to live for Christ. To live for Christ is to be a community of believers who together are striving to spread the Good News to "the least of these" around them. Paul knows who Jesus Christ is, and he lives to help others grow in this knowledge and to share the love of Christ with everyone he encounters. This is to be our striving, to help others encounter Jesus Christ, and to then help them progress in joy and faith as they grow into the image of Christ. Paul expects that they will not be intimidated by anyone because they serve Christ and they know that through him they have eternal life; death is gain.

So, Paul expects when he is released to find the church in Philippi standing firm in the one Spirit, striving side by side, and suffering for the gospel of Christ. This living in a manner for the gospel of Christ was sounding pretty good until we hit that idea of suffering. What does suffering have to do with living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ? In Philippi, under Roman rule, the believers have been persecuted and are experiencing the suffering that Paul is too familiar with as he waits in prison because of his sharing the gospel of Christ. Paul is acquainted with the idea of suffering for the gospel and expects that any who try to follow Christ and live their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel will experience suffering. This is a distant idea for us today living in the United States. We do not expect to suffer in any manner. We don't expect to be inconvenienced. We don't expect any kind of delay or difficulty in our lives. We expect to live lives without suffering, yet Paul has told those in Philippi they also should expect

to encounter the suffering that comes with a life lived in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ in a place that rejects those ideas. Our expectations have been developed in a country that was founded on religious freedom, and our expectation is that we will always be blessed with this gift. As the culture changes, we may yet see this same suffering come into our lives and we will be faced with new challenges to live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ. We need to be those who are in prayer, crying out to God to sweep his love across this land and to heal us of our sin, for us to reawaken to the steadfast love of God found in Jesus Christ and to give us new courage to share the gospel of Christ. Suffering is not something we expect when we seek to live a life worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but Paul cautions us that we too will suffer.

Now if you are like me, as I read Paul's letter, I struggle to translate his words into daily actions in my life. And so, I look to the lives of others who have lived lives worthy of the gospel of Christ and search for what they have learned that I can seek to emulate. I could find no better example than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. You may recall that Bonhoeffer was fortunate to escape the rise of the Nazis in Germany by coming to America to teach. But after a short time in America, he realized he could not live in comfort and watch what was happening to the church in Germany, and so he returned to live his life as one worthy of the gospel of Christ. He was imprisoned for his role in trying to stop Hitler, and then was executed a few days before he would have been liberated by American forces in the final weeks before Germany's surrender. Let's look this morning at a list that Bonhoeffer generated for helping Christians eradicate selfish ambition from their communities. I think if we can begin to grasp some of these principles and hold on to them, they will help us be transformed into a community living lives worthy of the gospel. Let me cover three of them this morning.

The first on the list is to hold our tongues, refusing to speak uncharitably about a Christian brother or sister. We need to listen carefully to what our lips are getting ready to say about another believer. If it is or can be interrupted by others in any manner as uncharitable, we need to let that idea die in our mind before we speak. We need to hold our brothers and sisters in Christ in such great regard that only praise for them can be found on our lips. How can fellow believers seeking to strive side by side in unity speak uncharitably of each other? Don't.

Number two, cultivate the humility that comes from understanding we are the greatest of sinners and can only live in God's sight by his grace. All have fallen short of the glory of God. We are to learn to live so our actions reflect the humility that comes with realizing that it is only

by the grace of God that we are saved. Our only hope to be reconciled to God was for Christ to die for us and pay our sin debt. He loved us enough to do just that. We need to humbly approach others as we stand firm in one Spirit.

Thirdly and finally, we need to listen “long and patiently” so that we understand our fellow Christian’s need. This is a difficult idea for me. I don’t always listen “long and patiently” and hear the needs of a fellow Christian. I think this principle is especially needed at this point and time in our struggles as a nation as we are witnessing the cries of racism. We need to listen, really listen, not to the planned speeches of those seeking to make a political point, but to the cries of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are trying to tell us what they are experiencing. We are to listen wisely, broadly, lovingly, with our mouths closed until we understand their need.

Our goal is to live lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. These three principles lived out in our lives will help us to begin to live in such a manner. And if you are curious about the other four, I will post them this week on Facebook. Try these three principles, and let the Spirit guide us into living them out with the idea of adding others as we grow. Look for a small group of people who are willing to walk with you and speak lovingly into your life to help you grow into these principles. Share your success, find joy in your failures, learn from them, and seek to grow through practice into the image of Christ. Let us be found as a community who is seeking to live our lives together in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Pray with me: Lord, send the Holy Spirit to guide us into the next step in our lives for us to become a community who is living our lives in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ. Give us courage to confess that we are not yet such a community and then guide us to our first step to entering into progress and joy in faith as we are transformed into such a people, a people of God. Lord, stir hearts to come together and strive with each other in love. Amen.