

**Eighteen Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
1 October 2023**

Philippians 2:1-13

A pastor at a large church was preaching his stewardship sermon for the season, and as he talked about God's blessings, he promised that God would heal anyone in the congregation who was generous in his stewardship. To prove it, he called for a volunteer. A young man left the nave and came up to the altar and asked the preacher to pray for his hearing. The pastor started chanting and took the young man by his shoulders and shook him. Then he cupped his hands over the young man's ears and chanted some more prayers. Finally, he shouted to the heavens, "He is cured! Thank you Jesus!" The pastor turned to the young man and said, "How's your hearing now?" and the young man said, "I don't know. It's not until 2pm on Thursday."

After finishing the Letter to the Romans on September 17, the Revised Common Lectionary introduced us to the letter of Paul to the Philippians last week, on the 24th. This beautiful letter, the most personal and affectionate of Paul's letters, may have been written while Paul was in prison in Caesarea between the years 57-59. Philippi was the most important city in the district of Macedonia. Paul planted a church in this city during his second missionary journey, most likely in the year 50 or 51, after a dream in which Paul saw "A man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'" (Acts 16:9). This was the first Christian congregation planted in the European continent, and judging by the gentle, loving tone of the letter, Paul's most loved congregation.

Absent from this letter are the direct, unapologetically confrontational tones of the Letter to the Galatians; the highly developed theology of Romans and Ephesians; or the disciplinary rebuke of the letter to the Corinthians. The tone of Philippians is one of deep affection and love. We hear expressions such as, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you" (1:3-4). And it is very apparent that this love is reciprocated by the church, "You hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." (1:7). It is for this reason that Paul exclaims, "This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight." (1:10).

The letter itself gives us ample evidence of the love this congregation had for Paul. In fact, the letter was written on the occasion of the return of Epaphroditus to Philippi. He was a man the church had sent to care for Paul, most likely on the occasion of his incarceration. He has fallen ill and Paul wants the congregation to welcome him back and care for him. Paul puts it this way, "I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He was indeed so ill that he nearly died... I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me." (2:25-30).

The letter is written from the vantage point of suffering. Prisons in the Roman empire were not known for their concern for human rights and there was no provision for a speedy trial. Roman law did not think of prisons as places of punishment. They were holding places where the accused were kept until trial and sentencing. Governors could keep the accused for years before trial. This was the case for Paul at Caesarea, where Felix, the local governor kept him for 2 years, hoping to get a bribe (Acts 24:26.) “Often, prisons of this kind were dug out of solid rock and were underground. Prisoners, their guards, and their provisions were lowered through an opening the size of a manhole. This manhole was the only means of entrance and exit.” (<http://www.mpumc.org/uploads/file/Prisons%20in%20Paul.pdf>).

Once prisoners were lowered to the prison floor, they were often shackled in place via leg irons. There were no provisions for appropriate sewers and cleaning of human waste. Sometimes, family members or friends of the prisoner would pay guards to allow them to clean their loved one’s space and to provide them with some basic care. This seemed to be the case for Paul. Most prisoners, however, did not have this luxury and often died from infections or malnutrition before their trial. When Paul says that he is an Apostle in chains for the sake of the Gospel, he means it quite literally. He is most likely shackled to the musty ground of a dark cave, waiting for a hearing before the Roman authorities.

Yet, what is incredibly amazing about this short letter is the fact that Paul does not complain about his anguish, does not appear angry or bitter, and does not feel hopeless. In fact, joy is the most apparent mood and attitude for Paul. He prays “in joy” for the congregation; he will “continue to rejoice” in his imprisonment because the community’s prayers will result in his deliverance; he begs his congregation to “make my joy complete; be of the same mind”; and he presents his sacrifice as an offering to God in love and encourages his people to rejoice with him, “But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.”

You may be wondering why a letter written from one of the darkest and most hopeless places on earth exudes such joy. Paul himself tells us why. “I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.” (1:12-14). The Apostle’s imprisonment gave him an opportunity to preach the Gospel to the imperial guard and to other prisoners. Additionally, fellow Christians, inspired by his commitment to the Gospel of Jesus, have also began to preach in the marketplaces in a bold and fearless way.

In today’s passage, Paul uses an existing Christological hymn to build a connection between his suffering, the congregation’s suffering and Christ’s own suffering. I can paraphrase Paul the following way: “If my suffering provides you any encouragement, if my love gives you any consolation, if you share in the same Spirit I share, if you have any sympathy and compassion for me, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, let mutual love abide, and be united in one mind.” This is a powerful invitation to avoid conflict born out of selfish ambition or conceit. Rather than selfishness and competition, the disciples must be humble, considering others as better than themselves. By doing this, they will share in the same mind of Christ Jesus,

who, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (2:6-8).

Christ Jesus, being fully God could have avoided suffering, insult, pain and agony. He could have called a legion of angels to rescue him from the cross, he could have provided for himself supernaturally. He willingly chose the path of radical obedience and empathy. He embraced fully his humanity in obedience to the father and as an act of loving empathy towards humanity. He became like us in every way, choosing hunger, thirst, pain and death on our behalf. It is because he chose humanity that our Messiah can be seen as “on the side of humanity.” He knows what it feels like to be alone, scared, abandoned, betrayed, mistreated, abused and humiliated. And because he personally knows everything that afflicts the human heart, he truly understands what we go through.

God’s loving provision for his people can be seen even in the darkest of places. Even when we are dealing with a difficult circumstance and we don’t feel strong enough to hold on any longer. But, if you pay close attention, if you watch and listen carefully, you will see Christ right next to you, giving you the strength and power to go on. This is why we have hope that God is in control of history and that all things will work out for the best for those who love and trust the Lord. This realization brings joy even in the midst of pain. We have an empathic Messiah who knows what it feels like to suffer physical and emotional pain.

May the word of Philippians bring you joy and peace this week. Remember that you are deeply loved by the one who took the form of a slave to procure your salvation. May he continue to bless you. Amen!