

INI

Philippians 1,12-21

Lent 4 — 6 March 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians, which was read earlier:

and I will rejoice.... For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Adversity can take many forms and can mean different things to different people. Adversity can be the result of physical circumstances — a lingering illness, a confinement, a loss of a loved one, a job loss or underemployment, and so forth. It can also be psychological, for example, feeling oppressed by outward physical changes. Some people have an imbalance in the chemistry of their brains that cause them to see the world differently than many other people and they are depressed where others see no reason for depression. Often it is a combination and interaction between physical and psychological circumstances.

But adversity can strike at any age. At seminary, I had a friend whose eight year old daughter had severe juvenile arthritis. Her growth was stunted and she would never reach what we would call a normal height. She needed braces and canes to walk. Her life was filled with pain, sometimes less severe and sometimes more severe. Some children at school teased her but her friends came to her defense. But she had an optimistic outlook on life and a faith that, in spite of her illness, God in

Christ had a plan for her life.

Paul's letter to the Philippians was written while he was awaiting trial in Rome, probably in the early sixties of the first century. He was writing to the first church he had founded in Europe while he was on his second missionary journey. While there, he had been beaten and thrown into prison (cf Acts 16). But he returned twice to Philippi on his third missionary journey (cf Acts 20). The congregation was dear to his heart.

One of the words which he uses again and again in writing to the Philippians is “joy” and “rejoice,” which Paul uses eleven times in this letter. But Paul was in adversity. His trial could result in the death penalty. Even though under house arrest, he was constantly chained to a Roman soldier. There were other Christians who made his imprisonment worse. As always, there were false teachers against whom he had to contend. In spite of adversity, Paul not only was joyous, but he wanted to share his joy, the joy of serving Jesus.

This brings me to my sermon theme for today, “**Always Being Joyous.**” I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Joy In Adversity**
- 2) Joy In Jesus; and,**
- 3) Rejoicing In The Future**

1) Joy In Adversity. Paul was sent to Rome in 59/60 AD to stand trial on charges that he had violated temple regulations against bringing a Gentile into the temple and stirred up trouble (Acts 21,28; 24,6). The charges were false, but Paul then had to spend two years in prison in Caesarea and then be sent to Rome to appeal his case before Caesar — which was Paul's right as Roman citizen. Paul appealed to Caesar to avoid a lynch mob.

Think about it. Paul spent two years in loose custody in Caesarea, which was a port city and the official residence of the Roman governor.

Part of the length of his stay was due to the fact that the Romans changed governors. Part was due to the fact that the outgoing governor was expecting a bribe. The new governor, Festus, did not know what to do with Paul and spoke with King Agrippa. Agrippa, who had little time for the high priests, said that if Paul had not appealed to Caesar, he would be free (Acts 26,32). Now at the writing of his letter in Rome Paul had spent another two years in custody.

Paul, however, did not despair. Rather, he used the time to witness to his captors and even members of the praetorian guard. He was allowed to meet with his fellow Christians and wrote other letters, for example, to the Ephesians, Philipians, Colossians, to Philemon, to Timothy, and to Titus. Paul, in the midst of adversity, could rejoice that “Christ is proclaimed” (Philipians 1,18).

But other Christians in Rome caused him “distress in his imprisonment” (1,17). That word “distress” means “pressure,” and can refer to the pressure and chaffing that chains would cause by rubbing wrists or ankles. They were preaching “Christ even from envy and strife” and out of “selfish ambition” (1,15+17). What does this mean?

There are Three explanations. One holds that some Christians were preaching against the Jews and against government authorities, and thus making Paul’s situation more difficult. The Romans did not like trouble or disorder and would look unfavorably at strife among Jewish groups — at this time the Roman authorities did not distinguish between Jews and Christians, and thought Christians were some sort of Jewish sect. To preach against the government itself was treason. Both would have made Paul’s situation more difficult by putting his proclamation of Christ in a bad light and made a guilty verdict more likely.

Another explanation is that there were certain Christians who just did not like Paul. They were orthodox in their proclamation of Christ but in their preaching they did not support Paul or his mission. In some ways it is an echo of David’s complaint in the Psalms: “They rewarded

me evil for good” (Psalms 35,12; 38,20; 109,5). It is a tragedy that even in the church of Paul’s day and today we can see violations of the Eighth Commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” People such as these do not speak well of another believer, do not defend him, nor put the best construction on everything. They attack the weaknesses of others — and who could be weaker than one languishing in prison? They betray and defame others. The result is to add to distress and tribulation. They betray a party spirit and seek up exalt themselves at the expense of others — in this case, at Paul’s expense.

Thirdly, it is some sort of combination of the first two explanations.

Regardless of precisely what these people did, Paul could still rejoice that “Christ is proclaimed.” Thus, these people are not false teachers. Elsewhere in his letter Paul denounced false teachers as “dogs” and “evil workers” (3,2) – and Paul definitely did not call them “brothers,” which presupposes a unity in the faith. Paul clearly is not rejoicing in false teachers or false doctrine. He warns against them. Paul’s tolerance of those who are against him, but still correctly proclaim Christ, is not a license either to accept or tolerate false doctrine. Paul, however, can live with those who do not like him personally.

Paul’s joy is not to be found in outward circumstances — circumstances can change. It is not an emotional feeling that he finds in himself — our emotions also change. Rather, Paul’s joy is a:

2) Joy In Jesus. On the night when He was betrayed, Jesus spoke to His disciples:

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. (John 15,11)

Here Jesus is speaking about the love God the Father has for Him and He has for His disciples. They are to love one another just as He loves them. And so He says: “Greater love has no man than this, that one lay

down his life for his friends” (John 15,13). Their love will be made full – or brought to completion – in the service of love they show to one another.

But Jesus soon will demonstrate an even greater love, not only for His disciples but for the world. He has kept His “Father’s commandments and abides in His love” (John 15,10). Not only Jesus’ love for the Father, but also His love for the world, in but a few short hours will lead Him to the Cross. He will endure the Cross because of the “joy set before Him” (Hebrews 12,2). What kind of joy can there be which would be set before Jesus so that He would endure the Cross?

On the Cross He died for the sins of the world. He died not only for His friends, His disciples, but also for His enemies. He died for all people because all carry the curse of sin, whose wage is eternal death. But on the third day Jesus rose from the dead. He rose to “sit down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 12,2). He rose to prepare a place for all who would believe on His name. He rose to show that not only had He broken the power of death, sin, and the devil, but He now lives forever, never more to die. He rose to promise all believers that He will be with them forever.

What greater joy could anyone have but the promise of the forgiveness of sins, which in the place of death gives life, and Jesus’ presence? He came as Paul “spoke the word of the Lord” and then baptized the jailer in Philippi and his whole family (Acts 16,30f). He came as Paul preached the Word of Jesus and the Christians in Berea searched the Scriptures to see whether Paul was telling the truth (Acts 17,11). Jesus comes in His Body and Blood of Holy Communion (1 Corinthians 11,23f). Jesus came through these Means of Grace and continues to come through these Means of Grace. These means give us not only the promise of forgiveness, but the promise of Jesus’ presence. What Jesus did for us is our ground of joy and these Means of Grace continually reinforce that joy.

That is why regardless of outward circumstances, both Paul and we can always be:

3) Rejoicing In The Future. Realistically, how did the future look for Paul? Who can tell what the outcome of the trial will be? Will those who preach the Gospel but dislike Paul make life more and more difficult for him? Will they affect the outcome of the trial?

In one way, for Paul, it does not matter. Why? As he says: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Those in Philippi who have been faithful to the Gospel not only have prayed for Paul, and continue to pray for him, but they even sent a collection to him to help him support himself while he was in prison. As Jesus served them through His death and resurrection, and as Paul served them by sharing the Word of Life with them, so now they can support Paul. They are supporting him physically and spiritually.

Paul is not resting on his own power. Rather he is determined that in his body — that is, in his actions and words — Christ will be exalted (1,20). This means that He will not respond in kind to those who dislike him. Rather, he will rejoice that Jesus is being proclaimed. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate. (1 Corinthians 4,12-13)

If Christ is exalted in Paul’s body, can Paul do anything less than Jesus did?

And while being reviled, Jesus did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him Who judges righteously. (1 Peter 2,23)

As Jesus said:

Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12).

Paul knows he is not alone. The Philippians have sent Epaphroditus with encouragement and money, to help Paul spiritually and physically (4,18). And Paul continued to serve them through his prayers and advice and encouragement.

Paul looks at his situation and knows that he is not really a prisoner of the Romans. Rather, as he says elsewhere, he is a “prisoner of the Lord” (Ephesians 3,1; 4,1; 2 Timothy 1,8; Philemon 1,9). He is a “imprisoned in the cause of Christ” (1,13). If He is suffering this for Jesus’ sake, he also has the promise of Jesus’ blessing and the call to rejoice.

The future is not an unknowable enigma in Jesus. The future for believers always rests in Jesus’ hands. These are the nail-scarred hands which were nailed to the Cross. These are the nail-scarred hands which He showed to His disciples, even Thomas who doubted Him. These are the nail-scarred hands which promise the ultimate victory which He was won for us, His forgiveness, His presence, and the reward of heaven itself.

In Jesus, the future always gives us cause for rejoicing, for not even death can ever separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Conclusion. Even as Jesus has served Paul in His death and resurrection, so for Christ’s sake, Paul will gladly and with joy serve others. He will not despair, even while in prison. But He will use the time given to Him to share the Word and in his body “exalt Christ.” He will be a living witness to his living Lord.

People are quick to say that if life hands you lemons, make lemonade. That may at times be easier said than done.

But in adversity, Paul shows us that there is no adversity that he suffered which Jesus did not suffer first. There is no future so light or dark through which Jesus did not go through first. In all these things, Jesus reached the joys of heaven so as to be able to share joy with us in this life. Joy in adversity. Joy in Himself. And even joy in the future.

Jesus meets us through other believers, strengths us through the Means of Grace, and in all circumstances lets us rejoice with Him and all the saints — that is, all believers— throughout all ages. Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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