



Christ and the Church: The Ministry of the Baptized*

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I. PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

We turn our attention to the book of Philippians after sixteen Sundays with Romans. The four readings before us contain more than half of the total book of Philippians and they afford the preacher an ample opportunity to acquaint the congregation with the contents of the entire book, to explore background material and to develop a series of sermons based on the thematic content of the four passages.

There are alternative readings for three of the four Sundays: October 18, St. Luke the Evangelist; October 25, Reformation Sunday; and November 1, All Saints. Bulletin material may reproduce any of the assigned texts, so the preacher should be aware of those options.

Philippians is well worth the time and effort; it contains several themes suitable for Reformation and All Saints: partnership in the gospel, justification by faith, hope, servanthood, and joy. Paul addresses these issues in this book; some sections are so rich they are repeatedly selected as appropriate texts for other occasions of worship. Philippians 2:5-9 is commonly used during the Lenten season; 4:6-20 is assigned for Thanksgiving Day; and 1:21 is commonly used in the burial service of the church.

*This essay was written after extended conversation with Craig Koester, Robert Hoferkamp, and Carol Baker, all of Luther Northwestern Seminary, and Fred Ringham, pastor of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church, Minneapolis.

The story of Paul's first visit to Philippi is recounted in Acts 16. Philippi was a leading city in Macedonia and a military center where the predominant cultural influence was Roman. Acts 16:16-24 contains the account of Paul healing the slave girl possessed by a spirit of divination, and being beaten and cast into prison with Silas. After Paul revealed his citizenship, he and Silas were released and ordered to leave town immediately.

The small congregation there must have flourished, for later on when Paul was again imprisoned, the congregation in Philippi sent gifts of money. It is clear from the writing that Paul thought of that congregation as being extremely supportive and in chapter 4 recognized that they were consistent from the beginning in their financial backing of his efforts to proclaim the risen Christ (Phil 4:15).

The context of the letter is important, since it sets the agenda for the content more than any other epistle with the exception of Philemon.

II. THE LESSONS

Pentecost 18: Philippians 1:1-5 (6-11), 19-27

The text begins with a formal introduction typical of Paul. He identifies himself and greets all of the members of the church in the name of Jesus Christ. Here he identifies himself specifically as a servant or slave (*doulos*), perhaps in anticipation of the theme of Christ the servant found in 2:7. Paul moves quickly to a thanksgiving (1:3-11) which not only expresses his warm feeling for the congregation in Philippi, but also introduces several themes which he will expand (such as fellowship, partnership in the gospel, his own personal situation of imprisonment, and eschatological themes).

More of an exegetical challenge is offered in 1:19-27. For instance, what deliverance or salvation (*soteria*) does he hope for in 1:19? Is he simply speaking of a release from prison? Probably not. According to the context, Paul regards his witness to Christ as the ultimate concern (1:18). He is determined that Christ will be honored in his body, whether by life or by death (1:20); he hopes that he will be delivered from the shame of unfaithfulness in his witness to Christ. In 1:19 Paul refers to Job 13:16 (LXX): "This shall be my salvation that a godless man shall not come before him." Apparently, foremost in Paul's mind was his desire to avoid being a godless or a faithless witness to Christ in the time of his testing. Therefore the term *salvation* is closely associated with persevering in the faith, particularly during the time of trial (see also 1:28 and 2:12).

In 1:21-23, we have an eschatological statement which seems to stand in some tension with other statements made by Paul. We may gather from his comments here that Paul believes there is an immediate passing through death to life with Jesus. What is puzzling is that elsewhere Paul consistently affirms a resurrection at the end of time (for example, 1 Thess 4:13-18). At some points, Paul assumes that he will live until the parousia, but here Paul recognizes that he may not. He reflects on death, and well he might. Roman prisons were not pleasant; they were life-threatening rat-infested holes. Yet Paul shows a remarkable lack of despair. If death comes to him, he will be free from prison shackles to be with Christ, a hope which seems to differ little from the hope of the resurrection ex-

pressed elsewhere. Paul repeatedly insists that death is no barrier to fellowship with Christ. If he lives, he serves Christ on earth; if he dies, he gains a closeness to Christ which is impossible here. Remaining in the flesh means that he will serve others and labor for Christ.

This is one of the strongest emphases on death as departure to be with Christ that one can find in Paul's writings. These statements must be understood within the context of Paul's wider articulation of the end things.

There are two major themes which might be developed in preaching. The first has to do with partnership. At the very outset of the letter Paul tackles the question of what it means to be in partnership for the gospel. He certainly is doing his part: enduring, preaching, proclaiming, teaching, and struggling to remain faithful to the message that he bears. The Philippians share in the conflict with opponents for the sake of proclamation (1:29-30), but Paul refers to the Philippians as his partners chiefly because of their financial responses and their eagerness to support him. As one carefully reads the letter of Philippians it becomes quite apparent that for

Paul the theme of fellowship meant primarily the financial and spiritual support upon which he, like many a missionary or pastor, is dependent.

As congregations begin stewardship drives this fall, it might be quite edifying for the preacher to focus upon the concept of partnership and to remind the congregation that from the beginning financial support of the work undertaken is at the heart of what Paul referred to as a partnership in the gospel. In the past, perhaps we have been conditioned to think of partnership in the gospel as meaning primarily spiritual unity and prayer support. But Paul's letter would suggest the urgent need for financial support, if not making it primary.

Nor does Paul forget to say thank you to those who have sacrificed in order that the work might continue. The first part of the passage clearly illustrates the joyful, positive, upbeat, and enthusiastic response that a missionary might make to a supporting congregation. Paul suggests that our partnership with those who proclaim is indeed a high calling and that we must offer our gifts, whatever those gifts might be.

The second preaching theme is the personal confidence and hope articulated by Paul. In this text Paul reflects about end things. Is death the ultimate disaster? Paul insists that it is not; the ultimate threat is apostasy. Indeed, death can be the occasion for the fulfillment of the final promise. Jesus Christ has indeed taken away the sting of death; the power of the resurrection reaches into every grave. Paul is redefining death and life. To live is Christ and to die is Christ; both are defined by Christ. Death has meaning because of continued fellowship with Christ.

Many persons live on the border of life and death. There will be in every congregation persons who struggle with illness, despair, and tragedy. Paul teaches us to face our own death; he leads us to examine the meaning of death and life itself. Paul, that marvelous mirror of humanity, explores his mixed feelings about prison and death. At one moment he wants release and rest, and at another moment he wants to be a faithful witness and to continue spreading the news of Christ's redemption. What a model for pastors and for congregations! Paul's example of devotion to duty and confident awareness of the power of God is inspiring for all.

Pentecost 19: Philippians 2:1-5 (6-11)

The lesson begins with a series of conditional sentences, "if...then" statements. The style can be misleading. Paul is using a rhetorical device here, assuming that there certainly *is* encouragement in love, participation in the Spirit, and so on.

One significant theological concern is how to understand the exhortations in 2:1-4. Is Paul simply offering human encouragement here: "Good, better, best, never let it rest until your good is better and your better is best?" At first glance Paul seems to be exhorting: continue to have fellowship, love, affection, and sympathy. Yet the statements are theologically grounded in something other than a simple striving for self-improvement or an effort to develop one's human potential. The exhortations are grounded in the example and activity of Christ, "who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (2:7). Therefore, the preacher would be wise to include these verses in the text for the day.

These exhortations and conditional statements are not offered as anew legalism for the people of God. They remain rooted and grounded in Christ. Even if Paul were speaking primarily of the mutual love, fellowship, sympathy, and affection of Christians, we would assert that the motivation for these actions derives and issues from the Spirit's activity in us. Christ is both the

ground and the example for our manner of life. It would be helpful for the preacher to develop a clear image of Christ Jesus' humility and obedience. Jesus abandoned all claims to the form of God in the choice of nothingness or emptiness. The rich one became poor for our sakes. Here is Christ under all the conditions of the human life, obedient even to death. While Christ's obedience is really to God, death may also refer here to all the forces and powers that determine human life, particularly the hostile powers. Christ triumphed over these powers, setting free all who had been in subjection. This suggests a cosmic understanding of redemption in contrast to a private, individualistic concept.

Paul's advice in 2:3 should not be taken as license for low self-esteem or a poor self-image. Elsewhere Paul lists his personal achievements and declares his opinions. Nevertheless, though no example of passivity or self-denigration, Paul did count the interests, needs, and status of others as more important than his own, particularly as he sought to call persons to faith or to unity in Christ. A large part of true humility is an honest assessment of gifts and skills, acknowledgment of diverse opinion, and a genuine concern for others. These attitudes edify the church and enable intimate fellowship and unity.

The ancient hymn Paul quotes in 2:6-11 is an early confession of faith proclaiming Jesus as Lord. It is read on Passion Sunday when we remember that Christ's humble service is not only our example but also the very ground of God's redemptive activity for us.

This passage suggests Christ's preexistence and a realm of reality beyond our senses. It is one of the most discussed passages in the New Testament. What does Paul mean when he writes, "He was in the form of God," and what implications does this have for our understanding of God? Clearly, this passage offers a vision of God who initiated a way of redemption before the foundations of the world and who is not limited to our own realm of reality.

The Christian as servant merits discussion and reflection. The preacher

can use the example of Christ as a model for believers, but more than that, the love and self-denial of Jesus literally frees us and empowers our love of others.

Few people would be opposed to humility, love, joy, and service. Yet the question of how one can love wisely does arise in all relationships. Congregations are ill served by pastors who always count others' opinions more valuable than their own, who feel personal time and family time come only after church time, and who are always looking to the interests of others before those of self and family. Nor do pastors alone face this issue. Business leaders wonder what priority should be given to an occupation and how to care for other human beings in a profit-motivated system. Women struggle with the demands of career and the other interests they may choose to pursue. Parish members realize that deciding how to use limited resources is often difficult, even painful.

Jesus' model of self-sacrifice illustrates good judgment. Jesus did not allow others to define his role of servanthood. We too are called to exercise our responsibility for our neighbors thoughtfully. To ourselves we owe honesty, integrity, and the freedom to make decisions about how we will serve and sacrifice. To others we owe love, care, our wisdom, and sometimes our toughness as we call them out of familiar and unwholesome life patterns. Note the importance of resisting intimidation in 1:28. We cannot allow ourselves to drift into a victim mentality, but we must carefully consider when to yield and when to speak and resist.

Seminary interns soon discover the complications of servanthood. Some naively think the pastor's role is to be a simple "do-gooder" in the community, a role which enables sin and fosters disrespect. Wise students learn to discern what servant role is needed in each particular situation and how to act positively with prayer and hope in the face of uncertainty.

Paul, our example, seems to illustrate a wise humility. In this letter he deals with some dissension, and so his advice is to consider others and be humble like Christ. On other occasions he advises steadfastness and opposition. Paul could be abased and self-sacrificing, but at other times he could be assertive and even confident enough to offer himself as an example. The one who could be all things to all people could also be unyielding and unwilling to retreat from a faith issue.

Pastor and people could do well to reflect about their call to ministry and the path of a servant, for there are delicate questions of integrity and judgment here.

Pentecost 20: Philippians 3:12-21

The topic addressed in this pericope lends itself to the Reformation theme of faith and is an option for the preacher who may want to combine it with the Reformation worship propers.

This section is polemical: Whom is Paul opposing here? In 3:2 he names his opponents—people who are in some sense advocating Jewish practices such as circumcision. The issue does not seem to be that these people are leading believers away from the faith but that they are adding unnecessary requirements to the Christian life and making the promise of salvation conditional. In 3:18-19, Paul warns against those whose "god is the belly," who "glory in their shame

with minds set on earthly things." Paul may be arguing against two groups: the legalists who insist on the observance of Jewish laws, and the antinomians who gorge themselves and indulge themselves sexually. Yet Paul may be aiming at the same people all the way through. Some Jewish Christians make a "god" of their belly by a preoccupation with Jewish dietary laws. The word "shame" was associated with the genitals. Paul may have used the expression "glory in their shame" as a slam against those preoccupied with circumcision.

In any event, "perfection" (*telios*) is the issue in 3:12 and 3:15. The Christian cannot attain perfection by following prescriptions, nor does perfection mean self-indulgence. Rather, Paul sees perfection as flowing from the cross of Christ (3:18) and the hope of the parousia, the final rule of Christ.

Perfection is perceived in the light of the power of God and not in light of individual attainment; it is an incorporation in us of what Christ has already done. It does involve the living out of Christ's example, but perfection cannot be measured by a series of personal achievements.

Paul's famous list of achievements ends with, "But whatever gain I had I count as loss [or refuse] for the sake of Christ" (3:7). Perfection here does not refer to our achievement or sinlessness but the righteousness of Christ which becomes ours through God's promise, a familiar Reformation theme.

The goal for Christians is to become mature and live in accordance with what God *has done* through the cross and *will do* at the end of time. In that sense Paul urges us to press on, to invite God to do God's will among us, and to shape our lives to fulfill God's intention for us now and at the end of time. Bonhoeffer suggests that this means that Christ takes on form (*Gestalt*) in

us. Verse 3:21 of our text is quoted in the church's burial prayers, a reminder of God's ability to bring all things to new life.

A great number of us are like Paul: we do the right things, come from the right families, fulfill all the requirements and hope that our obedience will bring peace. But we are disappointed and are therefore driven to Christ. All of our achievements are refuse, dung, as Paul puts it.

A preacher might remind the congregation of God's grace and help its membership to redefine perfection. Indeed a sage once remarked that a pastor with a few well-placed faults is in a good position to help people understand and accept their limitations and encourage them to live in God's forgiveness and acceptance. Somehow we believe we must conceal every fault, and our striving is often for the purpose of avoiding criticism. The power of God resides in our weakness and vulnerability as well as in our strengths. Our perfectionism reflects our unwillingness to live as fallen people under the grace of God. The text drives us to the cross.

One day all of this will change, opposition to God's rule will end, and we will be drawn to God's promised commonwealth. Paul reminds his readers of the future's claim on the present and the Spirit's work among them.

Pentecost 21: Philippians 4:4-13

In 4:4-13, Paul uses language found also in Greco-Roman philosophers, such as "virtue" (*arete* 4:8) and "self-sufficient" (*autarkes* 4:11). But Paul uses the language, he does not preach like a philosopher. The overall message is based

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on Paul's earlier theological presuppositions and includes references to the Lord, i.e., "Rejoice in the Lord," "The Lord is at hand," and "Him who strengthens me." He appears to be appreciative and open to the values and language of moral philosophers, but the overriding theme for this passage, and indeed for the whole book, is grateful joy for the church and God's blessings.

The word "joy" appears 17 times in Philippians, so it is sometimes known as the epistle of joy, and the theme is particularly evident in 1:3-11, 19-26; 4:4-7, 10-12. Despite Paul's personal imprisonment, he is able to identify several reasons for rejoicing: the gospel is being proclaimed; he is being supported in his suffering; lives are being transformed; and Christ will speak the final word.

Paul's joy is all the more remarkable because of his experiences (see 2 Cor 11:23-32) and circumstances. Joy is a gift of the Spirit. Even in the face of a lifethreatening imprisonment, Paul finds joy in living or dying for Christ. He has learned how to be content in all circumstances and how to receive strength when weak.

Whether one observes All Saints Day or Pentecost 21, the theme of joy is appropriate for the preacher. Joy flows from a deep inner assurance of the benefits of Christ and contentment in God. Spiritual values transcend temporal values and provide us with a basis for celebration and a reason for confidence.

Pastors have their burdens, but being faithful to Christ is difficult for all the baptized, given our societal values and challenges.

Pastors may wish to use the epistle and this passage for personal reflection as well. Is ministry a joyful occupation or a heavy burden? Can we appreciate the value of what we do, or

do we fail to appreciate spiritual treasures?

Paul W. Pruyser, in the *Minister as Diagnostician* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) writes about the meaning and shape of our sense of vocation. He says that a person should be willing to be “a cheerful participant in the scheme of creation and providence so that a sense of purpose is attached to his doings which validates his existence under the creator” (p. 76). Pruyser’s emphasis is on a heartfelt participation in constructive work which avoids alignment with malevolence (see Phil 4:8).

Perhaps those who draw near to the final curtain of their life or those whose life is threatened have a greater awareness of the value of God’s presence and gifts and a greater appreciation for the essentials of life. Thoreau’s comment may be read near Walden’s Pond: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

An ever-present spirit of joy offers impressive witness to the treasures we have found in Christ, where moth and rust do not consume and thieves do not steal.