

## Philippians 1

This week we move out of Acts and into the Epistles as we start with Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. We often speak of the letter to the Philippians in terms of being a friendship or joyful letter from Paul to one of his congregations.

So, what difference does it make that Paul is writing his letters to an entire community, the ecclesia, the assembly in Philippi? He could have addressed his letter just to the elders there. He could have written directly to the bishop, telling him what to say to his flock and what to do next. He could have exercised a "chain of command" understood both in the Roman household and the Roman Empire that recognizes authority in specific leaders who then require those beneath them to carry out the wishes of those at the top. There is efficiency and quality control in the top-down system. But he doesn't. Paul writes "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi". And this matters! Especially as we walk toward Pentecost.

Paul and Timothy are in jail, a condition of vulnerability in the ancient world that relies on friends outside for basic needs like food and blankets. He and his partner Timothy reach out to more partners beyond the prison walls. Paul's whole ministry is one of partnerships, sometimes with fellow missionaries like Barnabas, Timothy, and Silas, travelling alongside him, and sometimes empowering local leaders such as Lydia or Priscilla. So, while Paul seems like a pretty big personality, he was not a lone ranger. Paul's letter is clear that the whole community of brothers and sisters in Christ share "in the defence and confirmation of the gospel".

Prison or jail in the Roman world were nothing like our modern institutions. Often no more than a glorified pit meant to keep people for a short period of time, ancient prisons forced prisoners to look outside of their place of bondage to get even their simplest needs met - especially food. Without the assistance of those outside of the prison, the prisoners would have starved to death.

So, when Paul speaks indirectly of the Philippians' assistance throughout the letter, he is referring not only to their spiritual encouragement, but also to their material support: "I thank my God every time I remember you ... It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel."

Being jailed might make one rather angry, but Paul's letter to the Philippians is filled with joy and gratitude. His entire letter is one that exudes joy. Paul is not in denial, he is quite aware of what is going on. But he is focussed on the joy that Christ brings in his life, even life inside a jail cell. Paul starts his letter with his greeting, "Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus". The word "slave" can be a fraught word in North American culture. The history of slavery of African Americans can make the word "*slave*" one that is troublesome. The Greek word "doulos" used here for slave means "someone who belongs to another, a bond-slave, without any ownership rights of their own". This may sound like being a slave is the worst possible fate one can have, but that is not the case here.

In his letter, Paul intentionally uses a form of self-address to evoke a connection in the minds of his readers, in both cases Roman, between the familia Caesaris (the imperial household) and the familia Dei (household of God). In both cases, the status of slave is one of honour. Despite having no ownership rights of their own and belonging to another, in the imperial household, slaves served the bureaucracy of the government. They were state officials and even provincial governors, occasionally exercising more influence and actual power than those of senatorial status. To be a member of the imperial household, even as a slave, was to be a person of derived status – derived because the status of the slave was based on the status of his master, be it an army general, a senator, or even the emperor himself. Because the slave was an extension of his master, whenever he spoke it was the same as hearing it from the master himself.

Paul is saying that the same is true when we belong to the Familia Dei. As an apostle, which he means more in the sense of missionary than as some definitive office in the church, Paul is the mouthpiece of Christ his master. He does not speak on his own behalf. He speaks on behalf of God through Christ.

So, when Paul says that he and Timothy are slaves to Christ Jesus, he means what he says. It's important to remember what Paul is getting at here. This is not an endorsement of slavery in any time, but it is a description of Paul's relationship to Jesus, that Jesus is his Lord and Master and Paul is his slave. He is not simply loyal to Jesus, but bound to Christ, he is claimed by Jesus and can't just do as he pleases. It's also important to remember that Paul uses the same word, "doulos", to

describe Jesus in the next chapter. Jesus gave up his status as the Son of God to become not even a servant, but a slave.

Paul is showing a similar humility. Paul is a well-travelled evangelist who could have presented himself in that way. Instead he presents himself as very low on the totem pole. Paul calls the Philippians “God’s People” or “holy people”. The Greek word used here means “saints”. In modern usage, we think of saints as special people, like Saint Francis or Saint Augustine. But Paul is using the word “saint” or “holy” as “one that is set apart”. Paul is probably thinking of his ancestors. In Exodus it states that if the people of Israel kept God’s commandments, they would be a holy people, a people set apart. The Israelis set themselves apart not only by following the commandments, but through various traditions and cultural differences in their diet, in their worship, their marriage laws, the purity laws and circumcision. Paul is calling out the church at Philippi for living differently, living so differently that they are noticed and set apart as holy, as saints.

Another theme that factors in here is the concept of “koinonia” or partnership. Paul doesn’t see his ministry as a one-man show. Instead he sees himself as part of a larger team working for Christ. He is in ministry with Timothy and Silas, and he sees the Philippians as partners in ministry. “ I’m glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel, from the time you first believed it until now,” he says. They are praying for Paul and preaching the gospel themselves in their home town. Paul prays that they might grow in Christ, maybe hoping they would grow to become preachers and teach this to others. And because they have shown

love to Paul, he is showing love right back at them. It is a relationship of mutual admiration and prayer, a true, sincere partnership.

So, Paul's letter is an invitation to partnership. Christianity is a communal religion, a community religion. We can't be Christian in isolation. We need to be part of a community – both for the good of the community and for our own good. Paul gives thanks for support from a community where he is no longer present yet is still a part of it, even while he is in jail. Paul knows and delights in the fact that there are others out there helping to do the work of spreading the Gospel.

One of the questions often asked on grant applications is about partnerships. Who else is working on this project? Granting agencies often want to get a sense of how broadly-based a proposal is – which can be both a good thing and a bad thing. Sometimes we need to take the risk and strike out in a new direction trusting and praying that partners will follow. But often we are more comfortable, more daring in taking that risky step when we know we are not alone, when we are in partnership with others.

We can easily relate this kind of thinking to the Olive Branch. When Deborah was dreaming of opening a home for HIV orphans, a very risky dream – she needed that partnership to give her comfort, to give her confidence, and the will to take that giant leap. Our support as an outreach project for our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, eventually followed by a number of other Lutheran congregations and pastors, was the partnership that made that dream come true, and the establishment of Zion Home

and a number of other projects.

The final, crucial consideration here is Paul's imprisonment. Paul's situation should remind us of all the beautiful writings that have come out of prisons – Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison, and of course the letter to the Philippians! Putting Paul in prison might seem like a way to slow the movement of the Spirit, but instead of stopping the gospel, it only expanded. Some are spurred on by Paul's imprisonment to spread the good news far and wide. Others use the gospel for their own selfish ends. This should bother Paul, and it probably does, but he is nevertheless happy. "What do I think about this? Just this: since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad."

In this passage we learn what it means to be a Christian: to be one that is bound to Jesus, that is a saint, and to be happy even when the gospel is used for less than honourable ends. Martin Luther King is an example of what it means to live as a "slave" for Jesus, living as Jesus did, giving up status to become a slave for Jesus ... even unto death.

Martin Luther King was born Michael King. He visited Germany when he was a child. His father, also named Michael, was so taken by the trip and by the German religious leader, Martin Luther, he returned to the states and changed his name and his son's name after the famous pastor. The younger King said it was hard to live up to his namesake's legacy in the South where he grew up.

King realized he was in service to something much larger than himself. He was a slave for Jesus Christ in order to bring freedom for African Americans, if not all of America that was bound to racial prejudice and a system that kept African Americans down.

The night before he was assassinated in Memphis, King gave his last speech that showed his obedience to Christ. While others were seeking his life, he expressed joy in the face of danger:

*“We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t really matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”*

How are we living? Do we see ourselves as “slaves” to Jesus? Do we know that we are not alone in our work to spread the gospel? Can we express joy even in the darkest of times?

The Christian life teaches us that ALL of us are dependent on the grace of God. God always goes first and every single thing we do starts with God and not with

us. That means pride is replaced by gratitude for all who are people of faith. In addition, it is the nature of life in general and the nature of the church in particular, to be communal, to be a community, and to live in relationship with the God we encounter in Jesus and with each other. Autonomy is not and never was an option for the faithful.

Paul has no self-made illusions about himself. Despite being a proud Jewish lawyer or Pharisee, he knows that his work depends on the work and support of others. The Philippians have been especially supportive and especially generous. His work has been heavily underwritten by their love and their great generosity. He depends on them and is deeply thankful for their communal support, companionship and partnership in the Gospel.

The temptation to try to believe that we are responsible for ourselves is always there. The world will send us temptations and try to make us forget the truth about God and about life. But if we believe that God is a God of grace, then, just like Paul, we will all be humbled and grateful for the gifts that have come our way. Just like Paul, we will be thankful to those who have shared them with us. And we will be generous in sharing them with others, for they are not ours anyway. It has all come, in one way or another, from God, no matter how much we like to believe that we had a hand in any of it.

The claim that we all “share in the gospel” is a key narrative for Christian life, especially when so much Christian culture seems to focus on individual salvation.

The good news of Jesus, our experience of God's love and grace, is not an individual possession but a communal reality that God is enacting all the time and in which we are invited to participate. Instead of focussing on individuals, Paul calls attention to the community, "all the saints", who, together as a community, share in the gospel. This means sharing alike in the joys and in the sufferings of our common life on behalf of God's love for the world.

Amen.