

“Living is Christ and Dying is Gain”

September 20, 2020 (Covid 27 – Live Stream 3)
Philippians 2:20-30

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Focus Scripture: Philippians 1:20 to 30

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

The writer of Philippians, understood to be the Apostle Paul, in this short passage we focus on, is under house arrest. He must pay for his own household expenses and the Christians in the ancient city of Philippi have sent him money to help cover those expenses. The alternative, if he cannot pay, is to be placed in a Roman prison where he might likely die of starvation and disease. He says he wants Christ to be exalted now as always in his body, whether by life or by death. And he says, “I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.”

It takes me back to a weeklong workshop I attended a few years ago in Toronto by Encounter World Religions. This is a wonderful experience, sponsored by a Christian organization, to help us appreciate other religions and to see that at the core of us we have so much in common. I looked forward to one of the last days when we covered Christianity, because I

find that the descriptions given of Christianity often seem at odds with my own experience of Christianity. The instructor began by showing two great streams of Christianity, one focusing on the best way for us to live while on earth, and the second focusing on salvation and getting to heaven.

These two streams did not begin with Jesus, the disciples, or the first Christians, but much later, around the time of St. Augustine of Hippo, around 400 CE, the guy mostly responsible for the advancement of the doctrine of original sin. And so much of Christianity has seemed to focus on heaven and making sure we get there. But for us United Church people, we seem to focus on the work we are commissioned to do while here – our place in heaven with Jesus has been worked out and established.

I noticed Paul's odd wording when he writes, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." When you think about it, it seems a strange twist of phrase. We normally think of living as gain – we all want to live a long full life. And we think of death as Christ – we go to be with Jesus. But Paul reverses the ideas – living is Christ, death is gain. And he affirms that when he says that it is better for the Philippians for him to focus on the living because the Philippians need him. And he writes, "*Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.*" His Christian task was to follow the teachings of Jesus and the example of Jesus, empowered by the work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Heavenly concerns? Well, they're settled already and he'll get there when his work is ended.

Included in our service today is a pre-recorded video of Pam singing a Mumford and Sons song which contains a similar twist of phrase: "*Keep my eyes to serve, my hands to learn.*" Don't we normally think of eyes for learning and hands for serving? But here it is – eyes for serving and hands for learning. We learn by doing and best serve by observing and listening.

I am indebted to a Biblical Scholar, Edgar Krentz, who wrote an essay called "Civic Culture and the Philippians"; a peer-reviewed article. In it he explains the political nature of the Greek words used in this Epistle and in our passage for today. For example two words in our passage at verse 27: "*Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*" The Greek word we translate as Gospel or Good News meant political good news. They had a different expression for everyday good news, like "Good news! I got a job." This word was more like, "News about the common good!" Also in that verse is the phrase "in a manner." It literally means "as a citizen." At its root is the same root for our word "political." We would do better to hear that verse as, "Live your life in a political manner worthy of the news of our common good as citizens." The same is true of the Greek

word our Bibles translate as Church. That word actually meant a public meeting called for the purpose of discussing the common good. Imagine if churches saw themselves that way, not as merely religious gatherings but as invitations to explore the common good.

So much is lost in translation. I am beginning to think we don't spend enough time on the Scriptures themselves. Being retired I had the luxury of reading hours and hours of material about this passage, and pondering it, time I never had when I was serving fulltime as a minister. Problematically, it gave me a two-hour sermon ... that I have to give in 15 minutes. 😊

The last place I served, Knox-St. Paul's United Faith Community, did a lot of work with their Muslim neighbours. I remember one time when a young Muslim woman, who was engaged in religious studies at Carleton, attended as part of a paper she was writing on Protestant Christianity. Afterwards I asked her what would be a noticeable difference between our services and hers. She said that our services had a lot of prayer and very little sermon while theirs had a lot of sermon and very little prayer. I later asked someone in the congregation to keep track of how much time we spent at those two things in our service. It turned out to be about 25 minutes of prayer and 15 minutes of sermon. And because we can't possibly have a service more than an hour long, that meant the remaining 20 minutes was spent on, I guess, announcements! ... No, we also spent most of that on singing.

I never changed that, by the way. Prayer has its place for sure; but I always struggled with how do we spend more time with the Scriptures.

When I was newly ordained, and in my first pastoral charge, I visited a family of my faith community. It was summer and there was a screen door, but the main door was open. When they answered the screen door, I noticed the main door was propped open with a large object to keep the wind from blowing it shut. The large object was a family Bible. I confess that my first instinct was a bit judgmental. But my second thought was, "The Bible keeping the door open!" And being a preacher, my third thought was, "Hey, there's a sermon in that."

But if we had the time to read the Bible and understand what it says about the Way of Jesus, we would understand that our faith is about keeping doors open. We are here with a commission to continue the public ministry of Jesus. And we are political. Not party politics, but political in the larger sense of the word, about the common good. And as the United Church has written, a society safe for the weakest member is safe for everyone.

Philippians makes a good start. It echoes the idea of the prophet when God says; *I don't need your sacrifices.*” I don't need your worship. We may need to worship God, but God doesn't need our worship. God said, “Here's what I want you to do: Seek justice, love compassion, and walk on the earth where I walk” – with the marginalized, the racialized, and the stigmatized. At the nativity of Jesus, the angels did not sing, “Glory to God in the highest, and a bunch of religious doctrines you have to believe on earth.” They sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth.” Heaven is mentioned – it's where God is in glory. For earth, it is peace. And peace comes from seeking the common good. And we are not alone here. Though not in glory, God is here with us.

While serving in my last faith community before retirement, I found that we often worked closely with secular organizations and with other religious communities like Muslims. In our work together we didn't do god-talk. But we were together doing the work of Jesus without even mentioning his name. We worked together against poverty, for equity, for respect of all peoples no matter their race, ethnicity, religion, or anything else. And is not that what would be most important to Jesus? If God's name is not praised, is God still not present when we seek justice, act in compassion, and embrace human difference? If Jesus is not named, is the work Jesus gave us not still being done? And when we gather here, physically or virtually, are we here to make sure we get salvation and into heaven? Or is our salvation accomplished and we are here to remember who we are and who has sent us?

We will all one day pass through the doorway of death, like passing from the kitchen into the dining room. And we are assured of life beyond death even though we can't know what that will be. But for now, while we are in life as real-life Christians, for us, to live is Christ – to continue the work Jesus left for us – and to die is gain – our salvation and our lives beyond death is already set in place for us. Because of what Jesus accomplished on our behalf, we're in! For now, like the Philippians, this world needs us. It needs our concern, our love, and our eyes and ears. To this we are called. For this we gather and welcome others to join us. Later in Philippians, Paul says that our citizenship is in God's realm and we are ambassadors here. In our living, in our volunteering, in our home life, our shopping, our voting, our wearing masks and distancing, we are representatives of the Way of Jesus, and that is political. And by this we are known to be followers of the Way of Jesus.

You at Wall Street United are doing a good job at this. Keep it up. For I believe, and it's what this passage is saying to me, is that this is our Christian calling. Thank you for letting me speak to you and for being so attentive.