



Sermons

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Integrity grounded in Christ

Philippians 1: 1-18a Paul's prayer for the Philippians

I want to set the scene for the scripture that we are going to explore today through the words of a scholar named Calvin J. Roetzel, who wrote the book, "*The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*". It is important to remember the context in which Paul was writing. He wrote many letters to many communities and this particular one was to the Philippians. "Paul an apostle of Christ wrote to the Philippian church from a jail either in Ephesus in the winter of 55 or 56 or in Rome in 58 or 60. From the time of its founding the Philippian church had a turbulent history. Paul spoke of his shameful treatment and the fierce opposition he ran into in this place. The church itself was hounded by outsiders and fractured by pettiness and jealousy of insiders. Some of the people in the church of Philippi preached the gospel out of love and respect for Paul while others preached it out of partisanship."¹ All of this led him to write them a letter that pointed out how some of the people spoke of Christ from a place of envy and rivalry while others spoke out of good will. Some, according to Paul, spoke about Christ out of selfish ambition and false motives rather than integrity and truth. This did not however, discourage Paul from speaking about Christ and encouraging others. He rejoiced in fact that Christ was proclaimed in all ways. In some ways Paul was excited because at least people were talking about Christ. People were forced to debate and really wonder and discern what was truth, what was not.

Paul started his letter from a place of love and longing for the Philippian believers. He writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you. My prayer is that your love may overflow more and more with the knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best." And Paul goes on and shares that he hopes that his imprisonment will help others feel more confident in daring to speak the word of Christ with greater boldness and without fear. I asked you this morning to share a moment where you witnessed somebody else facing something difficult which then inspired or encouraged you. Paul hoped that by his experience and by the fact that he wasn't giving up and was still speaking the word of Christ to people even from jail would be enough to inspire all of us and all the people of Philippi to proclaim their faith in the Lord. When you think about it, history has shown that people who speak with boldness, people that challenge the authorities, who question traditions and practices, are like prophets, like Jesus, like Paul and

¹ Calvin Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul; Conversations in Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 113.

inevitably they end up being persecuted or killed. It is clear in the scripture today that Paul believes that it is worth it.

Paul is clear in his witness and his call on earth. He knows what Jesus has called him to do and he didn't live his call by saying the things that people always wanted to hear. He challenged people while at the same time loving them with all his heart. He loved them unconditionally in the way that Jesus had taught us. He loved them in spite of their frailties and failures, even their selfish pursuit.

The Oscar Best Picture Nominee, Lady Bird, is the film that we are exploring this day and it follows this story of this girl, a high school senior, who is struggling to find her way in a world that seems completely unfair. Lady Bird has this very complicated relationship with her mother, which often mothers and daughters do. And their relationship in my mind reflects the relationship that Paul had with many of the Philippians; Lady Bird's struggle with her desire to have what others had while holding on to the people that truly accepted her for who she was and loved her in spite of herself. She wanted more than she had. She wanted to be someone else. And so she changed her given name which was Christine to Lady Bird and got quite frustrated when her mother wouldn't call her that. She told people at school, including the nun's, my name is Lady Bird and she has these great posters of this half-lady and half-bird or vice-versa.

As she began her final year of high school at this Catholic Church we hear the priest proclaiming from the pulpit, the worship service at school that day, "we are afraid that we will never escape our past. We are afraid of what the future will bring and we are afraid we won't be loved, won't be liked won't succeed." It is this fear that often leads us to say things that we regret. To say things that we don't mean, to say things out of jealousy, envy or selfish ambition as some of the people from Philippi did. Lady Bird wanted to be cool, a natural tendency for youth in our world. Some of the followers of Christ in Philippi wanted to be seen by others as good, upstanding citizens and followers of Christ, but being Christian is not about being seen by others as good and upstanding being Christian is about truly living our lives from a place of compassion and thankfulness.

In this movie she felt like she hadn't truly lived. She wanted something big to happen in her life, she felt like it was really dull and boring. So she goes off on this path for about a year where several things happen: Number one, she gets her first boyfriend, which is really exciting and he seems like a totally sweet guy, until she finds him kissing another boy. And she is devastated, he is devastated, for his secret is suddenly seen and she cuts him off, doesn't want anything to do with him, and walks away.

In the meantime, she also gets caught in a lie. She wants to be part of the cool crowd and so she tells another girl that she lives in her now ex-boyfriend's grandmother's house down the street, which is completely wrong. Her friend goes to that house only to discover it's not her house and so now she is faced with 'uh-oh, that's not good, now she knows the truth about me, I live on the

wrong side of the tracks'. If that wasn't enough she and her mother push each other a lot. She ends up applying for a college that her mother first of all tells her there is no way she would get into, second of all that really she never will finish of accomplish anything that she is going to do, she is not smart enough; well this spurs her on to apply anyways and get her father to help her without her mother's knowledge and see where that might end up. But in the end all of these people help her to discover what's most important. Her negativity, her selfish ambition, her envy and the rivalry all lead to some very hurtful acts, but like Paul through these times of suffering, hurtful times; some miraculous transformation can happen when we stop fighting, when we instead open ourselves up to accepting what we already have. When we stop and reflect, when we discern and when we are ready to listen we will receive love and compassion that we seek. And when we receive this love and compassion we, like Paul, will discover our purpose. And when we know what our purpose is and are true to that purpose we will find the strength to dare to speak the word to share our faith with others with greater boldness and without fear, without worrying about if people will be mad at us or not.

There are people in our lives, and I am sure each one of you can identify at least one, who are able to be direct with us in a way that no one else can; who speak the truth to us, who challenge us, often from an outside perspective when words and the actions between these two people may seem hurtful, but actually they are words of love, words that say, 'I believe in you.' Lady Bird's mother loved her daughter with her whole heart and wanted her to succeed. Yes she was hard on her, yes she challenged her; she wasn't an enabler. Rather her mother pushed her to become the woman that she knew she could be the type of woman that asks for forgiveness from her friends. It's a beautiful scene in the movie where she realizes that she is not with the people she wants to be with. She thought they were, but they really weren't and so she goes back to her best friend who's been with her through thick and thin and they find a way to reconcile and forgive one another and their relationship grows stronger. There's a moment when her ex-boyfriend comes to her and says please don't tell anyone my secret and even though she is mad at him she embraces him and promises him that she won't because she knows how difficult it is for him to speak his truth. Then at the end of the movie she reclaims her given name. And once she has done that she realizes who she is and her mother helped her to get that way and so she tells her mother that she loves her.

Paul is telling the people of Philippi that he loves them for who they are. He's pushing them and challenging them so that they will become the people that God would want them to be. There's a great modern parable of a girl who's tired of struggling and fighting, who goes to her dad and says, 'Dad I am just tired of this', and he just happens to be a chef and he puts three pots of boiling water onto the stove and he doesn't say anything to her. In the first pot he puts some carrots, in the second pot he puts some eggs and in the third one he puts some ground up coffee beans. And she is sitting there wondering and he doesn't say anything to her and after a certain amount of time he empties out the carrots and puts them into a bowl, he takes the eggs out and puts them in a bowl, and he pours the water with the ground coffee beans into a cup. And he asks

his daughter “Pick up the carrots, what do you notice?” And she says, “They’re soft.” And he says “What about the egg?” She peels it and of course finds a hard-boiled egg. And then she takes the coffee and she takes a sip and the smell and the aroma makes her smile. And she looks at her dad and says, “What’s the point of this?” And her dad said, “The carrots that started off strong, when they faced adversity and being boiled they turned soft and weak. The eggs had this fragile exterior and when faced with the same adversity, became hardened inside. The ground coffee beans, when they were faced with the same adversity transformed into something amazing.” Paul is encouraging us to be like the coffee beans. The world is full of pain and hurtful things and we need to find a way to be true to who we are, to be strong even in adversity and hold on to our faith that Christ has given us so that the world will be transformed. Like Paul it is not the minister’s job to do the work of the gospel. The work of the gospel is done by all of us. We all have a part to play and I hope and trust that we can work through the adversity to become that fulfilling coffee that you get first thing in the morning, that wakes you up, that warms you up, and that allows you to be the person you know you want to be in this world.

Our hymn today, “When Pain of the World”, says

When pail of the world surrounds us with darkness and despair,
when searching just confounds us with false hopes everywhere,
when lives are starved for meaning and destiny is bare,
we are called to follow Jesus and let God’s healing flow through us.

Let us help one another find our true destiny so that we can follow Jesus and let God’s healing flow through us. And for this we give God thanks, so let’s sing this together, friends.