

"Standing Firm"
Philippians 1:21-30
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Context is everything. When something is taken out of context its true meaning can be severely altered. Passages of scripture, for example, are particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding and abuse when in the hands of agenda-driven folks, taking them out of context. So context matters. And it helps to know the context of Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi, to understand that he is writing to them from prison.

"For me to live is Christ and dying is gain," indicates that his current surroundings are anything but pleasant. In fact, he might be better off dead than alive, he can't help but thinking. That could be his way of coping, and of trying to come to terms with the uncertainty of his imprisonment, since execution was not outside the realm of possibility for him.

And then comes the plea, his appeal for them to remain steadfast and faithful in the face of similar opposition. "Stand firm," he says, "in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel—never letting your opponents intimidate you." Furthermore, the fact that you have opponents in the first place, the fact that some people are threatened by the gospel we proclaim, is proof that they are on the losing side.

Back in the days of Apartheid South Africa, Desmond Tutu once proclaimed, and is widely remembered for shouting through a bullhorn to pro Apartheid forces assembled outside his church,

You have all the guns and you have all the power, but what you don't understand is that you have already lost...you are on the wrong side. Come join the winning side.

That's standing firm. That's living confidently. That's living as if the gospel promises are true. And to do that, to stand firm in the face of opposition and to all the challenges we face, we need one another. We need to come together and stand with others, united in one spirit.

And Paul is writing from prison, let's not forget. He's alone, without the wisdom and counsel of others, which is never the best way to discern things. Presbyterians by the way, believe just the opposite. That we are better collectively—that we more fully experience the spirit's presence and more accurately discern the will of God when we do that work together and not alone.

Elsewhere in Paul's letter, in fact just prior to the portion I read moments ago, he expresses his concern that they not succumb to the false preachers of a phony gospel. A large issue in the early church was circumcision, and whether or not it was required to become a part of the community. It takes no imagination to figure out why that was such a thorny issue. Remember, the earliest converts to Christianity were Jews, so when uncircumcised Gentiles showed up wanting to become part of the movement, circumcision was a delicate issue.

But peel back the layers of that heated debate, and it becomes clear that the real issue at hand was what constituted a true Christian. In a real way, it was the familiar debate over a new way verses the old way; new teachings verses a fundamentalist approach. And as we know well, this seems to be a debate that is

alive and well today. Or perhaps a better way of describing it, it's a debate that is alive and very unhealthy today.

Think about it for a moment. When threats of nuclear destruction, on a scale the likes of which the world has never before experienced, resulting in what many estimate would kill some 20 million people—when those reckless threats are actually cheered by people claiming to be Christians—followers of Jesus—“pro-life” people of faith, they have succumbed to a false gospel.

Sitting in a prison cell, Paul had every reason to be wary of what happens when religion colludes with the government and those in power. When the relationship between religion and government becomes too cozy, with each using the other for political and often financial gain, it does not in any way reflect the teachings of the Christ or emulate the spirit of the life he lived.

But the answer to bad religion isn't secularism, it's better religion. It's an informed and faithful reading of our sacred text. It's living authentically and lovingly, the way Christ taught us and showed us how to live and to treat our neighbors as well as strangers.

Paul wanted those early Christians to be of the same spirit—to be captives to Christ and the gospel, and not captives to the spirit of the age which, for us today, apparently means buying into a sense of triumphant nationalism. Nothing could be more misguided or dangerous, and history bears that out. And nothing could be more perversely damaging to the faith, than for it to be coopted, used and abused by devious people for political gains.

Because what happens to the poor as a result of that?

What happens to the oppressed as a result of that?

What happens to the sick as a result of that?

What happens to immigrants and refugees as a result of that?

You know.

You know what happens to them. You know who gets left out and worse, shoved even further down the ladder.

When religion casts its lot with consumerism over compassion; when it advocates violence rather than peace; and when it cares more about its own profits rather than being prophetic, speaking out against injustice and on behalf of people whose voices have long been silenced, it is not Christianity.

Not even close.

And Paul was right to worry about those early Christians, who were up against overwhelming odds, including societal and family pressure. It is never easy to cut against the grain or to go against the flow—to walk a different path. And the seductive, tempting power of a whole host of influences, vying for our attention and allegiance, pulling us away from the gospel's imperatives, can be so strong.

Let's face it, we can be so easily distracted, so easily influenced—so fickle. And we can be so quick to give up and lose interest, even in that which was once held dear—sacred, even.

And it's so easy and tempting to fall in line with what's popular and with what masquerades as success. To lack the discernment of knowing what merely calls itself Christian and what really is an authentic, Biblical witness of Jesus' teachings.

Paul was right to be concerned for them, and in his desire for them to come together, to be of one spirit and to stand firm in the faith. And so he wrote them a pastoral letter, expressing his love for them and sharing his concern for their wellbeing.

As most of you hopefully know by now, I wrote a pastoral letter of my own this past week, announcing my decision to retire from parish ministry. I believe there are copies of the letter in the office for those who have not seen it. This was not an easy or quick decision on my part, but one I've prayed about and thought about for a long time. It is also a decision with which I am at peace. In the days ahead, we will have plenty of occasions to discuss this and say our goodbyes. And while I may be at peace with my decision, I did want you to know that it wasn't easy or casually reached.

So when I read this passage from Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi, it spoke to me, and to what I am beginning to feel as I live into the reality of this decision. Particularly when Paul describes his desires in this way,

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...

How could that not leap off the page at me, especially now? As your pastor, it is precisely what I want and hope for you now, in the living of these days. And when I become your former pastor and am absent from you, it will be exactly those same things that I will want for you, and will hope to hear about you. That indeed you are standing firm in the faith, striving side by side and united in one spirit for the sake of the gospel.

Churches learn a great deal about themselves during a time of pastoral transition. But this I know, and I believe you know it as well, now is the time for this church to come together, as a community of faith and as brothers and sisters in Christ—standing side by side, with one another and being of one spirit.

And as you do that, which I believe you will, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Amen.