

First Presbyterian Church
Philippians 1:21-30, “To Live is Christ”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/20/2020

Okay everyone, we need some encouragement in our faith today.

At least *I* need some encouragement in *my* faith,
so I hope I’m not stepping on anybody’s toes
by projecting how I’m feeling onto you.

Probably not, though, because we can always use some encouragement.

I’m just feeling like it’s not that easy of a time to be a Christian.

It would be much easier *to not feel a responsibility* to my neighbor
because God sent Jesus among us to live and die
as our common representative, uniting humanity
in the call to reconciliation.

I mean, if I didn’t believe that, I could just say,

“Forget everybody else, it’s me first in this life.
And if not me first, us first – the people on my team first.
My country first, everybody else second.” It would be easier!

On the other hand, if I didn’t believe that God loved me while I was yet a sinner,
then I could also just say,

“Hey – anybody who likes those ‘me first’ people
are evil. They’re rotten, and there’s no hope for them.
We’d all be better off if we could just
run those ‘my country first’ people off a cliff.”

That would also be easier,

but because Jesus loved me in my sin, I also have to love others in their sin.

It’s clear throughout history that the will to power at all costs is evil,
but an “ends justifies the means” approach to stopping those
who claim power is also evil.

To say this another way, it's not an easy time to be someone who believes
that God's way of changing the world is not
by overpowering and controlling the sinners –
racists, exploiters of the earth, the power hungry, and liars.

The good news is that through his death and resurrection,
Jesus has been made King by God,
and that Jesus' kingship is very different than what we see on earth.

This means that God doesn't change the world
through political parties or economic theories,
or more or less taxes.

God's way of changing the world is through
communities of people who organize their lives around love
that is more powerful than sin,
because this love is not their own:
it's the love of Christ who died and rose again.

It's not an easy time to believe that, because if you do, there will be opposition.
And back when Paul wrote Philippians,
it wasn't an easy time to believe it for the church in Philippi, either.

So if we believe that, then we need some encouragement. What is it?

The encouragement offered up from the passage we read today is this:
However hard it is to believe what we believe about Jesus,
and however bad it's going to get as a result,
God has got your back. [REPEAT]

Not only that, but if God has got your back,
then as long as you're around here on earth, believing what we believe,
you have a job to do:
support others in the faith without being intimidated
by the opposition.

Because God has our back,
we are called to endure whatever insults are thrown at us
for the sake of others.

What's our church mission statement?

“Together in Christ for all.”

We are united by our faith in Jesus for the sake of supporting others.
That's ultimately what this passage is about.

Now we have to realize some things about Paul here.

He's not writing this letter from his cottage on the lake,
occasionally going out for some fly fishing
and then grilling up what he caught for dinner
before writing some more by the glow of the fire.

No, Paul is in prison.

Paul is in prison, and he's facing real opposition for what he believes.

The Philippians are facing the same kind of opposition for what they believe.

So Paul writes, **“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”**

When I was in youth group, that line was very impressive to me.

It made the Apostle Paul into some kind of a “tough guy” Christian.

He's not messing around here – he's saying that between living and dying,
he'd honestly prefer to die because

life in heaven with the Lord offers a lot more perks than his life
here on earth.

Here is Paul saying,

“Bring it on, world! Give me your best shot, because either way, I'm good.”

If life is going perfectly, it's a little difficult to swallow this concept.

But life hasn't been going perfectly for us, has it?

A pandemic fills the air and requires us to wear masks...we can't breathe.
Cities across the country erupt in protest over racial injustice,
because George Floyd couldn't breathe.
Federal troops flood Portland streets with tear gas,
and protestors can't breathe.
We've been hit with climate change induced wildfires
and we can't go outside due to the smoke—we can't breathe.
And after a long bout with cancer Ruth Bader Ginsburg
found that she also couldn't breathe any longer,
just weeks before a presidential election...

When we were in the thick of the smoke, my 9 year old son, Caleb said
“Mom, I wish we could just go back to our normal pandemic life.”
Our normal...pandemic life.

For me to live is Christ (Christ crucified and unable to breathe!),
but to die is gain.
Is Paul starting to make more sense now?

Hey, God – we can't breathe and our kids think pandemics are normal,
so if now's the time, we're good with it!

But Paul doesn't dwell long on going to heaven right now.
In v. 24 he rejects that. He says, “It is more necessary *for you*
that I remain in the body.”

It's not better for Paul, but it's better for the Philippians.
It's better for others that Paul stick it out and keep the faith,
and so he is committed to continuing with them for the sake
of their progress and joy in the faith.

That's commitment. That's organizing your life around the love of God in Christ.
And so Paul expects nothing less of the church in Philippi,
and there is nothing less expected of us as the church in McMinnville.

He writes in v. 27, “Whatever happens, as citizens of heaven
[notice – our earthly citizenship and nationality is greatly downplayed]
as citizens of heaven, live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

Commentator Stephen Fowl translates it like this:

“Do this one thing: order your common life
in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

When I look around this country at those who claim Jesus as Lord,
and I see how people with Jesus’ name on their lips
have organized their lives, it’s clear we’ve got a long way to go.

We’ve allowed ourselves to be co-opted by earthly kings
and the allure of earthly power,
forgetting the way in which God brings goodness into the world.

So I encourage you not to be discouraged if you find it hard to believe
what you believe, not to feel bad if you think you don’t belong here. Why?
**“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him,
but also to suffer for him.”** That’s v. 29.

Don’t let the bullies frighten you,
and don’t let people guilt you into demonizing those who don’t see clearly.
God’s love is bigger and deeper than that.

This is a time for people of faith to use their faith.
God is on your side – and God’s demonstrated that through Jesus.
So let’s also support and encourage one another,
striving together in one accord.

For if we live, our life is found in Christ crucified.
And if we die, then we have gained more than we can possibly imagine.