

Sermon Notes September 24, 2017

Text: Philippians 1:21-30, Centrality of Christ

All scriptures for this Sunday http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp20_RCL.html

Today I borrow heavily from one academic. His name is Troy Troftgruben, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. For his other commentaries go to https://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2_troftgruben_troy. To me, Philippians is an important lens for understanding the centrality of Christ. You might find your groove through visualizing God as Father/Mother, Spirit/Divine Presence, ground of being or something else. And that is great; however, let Paul's understanding of Jesus expand your view of God.

Troy's writing

"For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain". For us who read from a context of relative ease, these words are jarring. Paul writes from prison (Philippians 1:7, 13-14, 17), uncertain whether he will die (verses 19-20), hoping only that "Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death" (verse 20). The circumstances have not dampened Paul's joy (see 1:18; 3:1a; 4:4, 10). Perhaps they have even clarified his focus. Regardless, Paul's words in this passage crystallize two of the greatest takeaways.

Takeaway #1: The centrality of Christ (1:21-26)

Christ is the one for whose sake Paul has deemed all past trophies and treasures "dung" (skybala, NRSV "rubbish," 3:8). What is more, Christ exemplifies both the "mind" believers are to have (2:5) and the general pattern they are to live (2:1-4, 5-11). Here in our passage, Paul attributes Christ with the significance of all living: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain" (NRSV).

Between life and death, Paul confesses "I do not know which I prefer" and "I am hard pressed between the two" (verses 22-23). However surprising (and potentially dangerous if taken out of context) Paul's flippancy about death is, his rhetorical point is not about death but about Christ -- and his power over death. Paul writes as one seasoned in life-threatening situations for Christ's sake (2 Corinthians 11:23-29), making this instance nothing new.

Christ at the center

One of the most striking features of Philippians is how it places Christ at the center: at the center of worthy pursuits (3:4b-14), at the center of thinking (2:5), at the center of ethical reflection (2:1-11), at the center of life (1:21-26), and at the center of worship (2:9-11). Gordon Fee points out: "On anybody's reading, Christ plays the absolutely central role in Paul's life and thought, and nowhere is that more evident than in Philippians."

Takeaway #2: A life reflective of the Gospel (1:27-30)

Philippians 1:27 issues the letter's primary appeal: "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." After the initial greetings (1:1-2), thanksgiving (1:3-11), and circumstances (1:12-26), Paul here begins to direct hearers toward specific behavior (see 1 Thessalonians 2:12 for similar language).

The verb for "live" (*politeuesthe*) is not Paul's typical word choice for patterns of living (see also *peripateite*, Galatians 5:16; Philippians 3:17, 18). It is the language of public citizenship or civic loyalty, with political overtones. Later Paul uses the same root to remind the Philippians "our citizenship (*politeuma*) is in heaven" (3:20). These word choices together issue a politically-laden charge to those in a city with strong Roman loyalties: "live in a way that honors the message of Christ" -- a message that proudly calls him (not Caesar) "Lord" (1:2; 2:11; 3:8, 20; 4:5, 23).

Paul observes "you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have" (Philippians 1:30). Given his circumstances, this must mean harassment at the hands of Roman authorities (see also 2:14-16; 3:2-4a). Elsewhere Paul reports "we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi" (1 Thessalonians 2:2), and Acts records experiences of this kind (16:19-40). To believers in this city, Paul encourages standing firm, trusting that suffering for Christ's sake is finally a privilege (Philippians 1:27-29).

Suffering for Christ

Many of us today do not often suffer for the gospel. But Paul's charge to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" still stands. His appeal calls us to a faith that is public (vs. private), a witness that "strives side by side" with others for the gospel, and a devotion to Christ as Lord that governs all other loyalties -- despite the consequences.

I hope Troy's words about Philippians gave you a sense of the call to live your faith. I have to constantly remind myself that God owes me nothing, but has given me everything. So when I suffer, I remember Paul words, "living is Christ and dying is gain". No matter what, I am remembering look to Jesus in every single terrible-wonderful-boring-awful-beautiful-blessed moment.

Have great week, Pastor Todd