

LIVES WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

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TEXT: Philippians 1:27 “Only, live your life 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.”

PURPOSE: To urge us to work together as a community of faith to be worthy of the good news that Jesus has entrusted to us, confident that he is the one who makes us worth by his grace.

We had a scare here two weeks ago that started with me. It began with me feeling a nearly complete lack of motivation. The stuff going on in our world has really gotten under my skin, and sometimes, it leaves me with a very heavy sense of dismay and helplessness. Initially, I chalked my mood up to that, expecting, as has been true in the past, that I'd snap out of it soon enough. But by mid week I realized that my temperature was elevated. It had been so long since I'd run a temperature that it didn't occur to me right off. By Thursday, my temperature was high enough that I called my doctor, which began the process which ended with me being tested for COVID-19, and told to self-isolate until I got the results, which would come Monday or Tuesday of this week just passed. Fortunately, Lindy is a very resourceful wife and grandmother, so the household issues sorted themselves out fairly quickly. Fortunately also, this church has a fine and capable worship team, which quickly took over worship for last Sunday. Please express your appreciation to Pat, Roberta, Keira and Connie for what they do on behalf of this church's worship week in and week out.

With all that tended to, I began to consider who would be impacted if my test was positive. I thought of all the people, most of them members of this church, with whom I'd had direct personal contact the past week. I trembled thinking how their lives would be affected if they had to self-isolate. I spent the weekend deeply concerned for all those people. On Monday, while I was on a Zoom meeting with Scott and Heather, I got the call that my results were negative. So the two of them, who were among the people with whom I'd had personal contact, were the first to hear the good news.

We're past that now, but the fear I felt made me realize that I've relaxed my vigilance with regard to safe practices to reduce the possibility of transmitting the virus. I've shared this with others here at the church, and many have agreed that we've let ourselves be more casual about this than we should. So I'm asking all of us to think about our interactions, to keep our distance and to keep wearing our masks as much as we can. Believe me, you don't want to be frightened for people you care about because you aren't sure if you're carrying the virus.

I turn our attention now to today's text from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. There was Paul, sitting in a prison, probably in Rome, waiting for the opportunity to make his appeal before Caesar himself regarding charges leveled against him, writing a letter to reassure the Christian congregation in Philippi, a Roman colony, that he was doing well, and to encourage them in the faith. "I'm all right," he wrote. "No need to worry about me. I want you to remain devoted to the faith. And I want you to be joyful. If I hear that you're faithful and joyful, that will unquestionably sustain my faith and my joy."

How could he do that? With the full force of the empire lined up against him, with his life in jeopardy, how could he be overtaken with gratitude for how others are living in faith? How could he be so full of concern for the spiritual and relational health of the people in the church in Philippi? Most of all, how could he be as joyful as he describes himself in this letter, and how could he so deeply desire that the Philippians be equally joyful?

The questions could easily be questions we are asking. We are facing an insidious enemy, the coronavirus. Our lives, our financial stability, and our emotional health have been hugely impacted. We are citizens of a country wracked by political turmoil. Racial injustice has sparked protests, calls for reform, and violence across the country. Western states are overwhelmed by uncontrolled wildfires. There have been so many hurricanes this year that we're running out of names for them. How do we sustain gratitude? How do we muster enough energy to be actively concerned for people experiencing more hardship than we are? Most of all, how might joy overtake our anxiety? How might we be joyful faced with the dreadful forces aligned against us?

From his prison cell, Paul offered an answer: "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Are you imprisoned? You can still live worthy of the gospel of Christ. Are you struggling to find a way to support your children's schooling during the pandemic? You can still live worthy of the gospel of Christ. Are you deeply disturbed by our country's political ugliness, by the devastating impact of climate change, by racial injustice and by the ways that protesting has led to violence? You can still live worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The word our translation renders "life" is, in the original Greek, "*politeuomai*." You may have caught something sounding like "politic" in my pronouncing it. That's because it's a word more precisely translated "citizenship." One Bible version renders

the phrase, “your everyday lives.” (Jerusalem Bible) So how do these ways of putting it speak to you? Live your *citizenship* in a manner worthy of the gospel. Live your *everyday lives* in a manner worthy of the gospel. Wow. The arena where we are to live worthy of the gospel is the messy, dangerous, frustrating world of American politics. The arena where we are to live worthy of the gospel is at home, where there are chores waiting for our attention, and bills to pay, and children or parents or maybe both needing our support, and neighbors throwing parties with no regard for social distancing. It’s one thing to keep up with our children’s schoolwork. What’s different about doing that in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ? It’s one thing to be paying attention to current political and social issues, even getting involved by volunteering for a candidate or participating in a protest. What’s different about doing those things in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ?

Paul offers no guidance about this, because Paul’s focus was not on individuals, but on the Philippian congregation as a body. His concern was that the Philippians live their life as a community in a manner worthy of the gospel. He fleshes out what he meant by urging them to “stand firm in one spirit, to strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and to be in no way intimidated by [their] opponents.”

I see no reason here to set aside thinking about how we can be worthy of the gospel in our everyday lives and our personal engagement with politics and social issues. But I hear Paul suggesting that my personal capacity for living worthy of the gospel is enabled by my congregation’s efforts to live corporately worthy of the gospel. It is from the ways we together stand firm in one spirit, the ways we strive together for the faith of the gospel, the ways we refuse to be intimidated as a church by forces opposed to the gospel, that we find insight and encouragement in our individual efforts to conform our personal lives to the gospel.

How about Paul’s appeal to be “in no way intimidated by [our] opponents”? There is much surrounding us that opposes the gospel way of Christ. As I said about my own state of mind as I was on the verge of getting sick, the sum total of global distress, the devastation so many people are experiencing, the stubborn entrenchment of injustice and the rancor perverting our politics, can intimidate me at times to the point of spiritual paralysis. On our own, especially if we spend too much time being sucked in to cable news, we certainly are more susceptible to dismay and helplessness than we are to the virus. But together? Together as Christians? Christians living in spiritual solidarity with Christ’s friends in Alabama and Oregon and Kenosha and Louisville and Zimbabwe and China? What force on earth is more powerful than that, especially if we

as a people are filled with enduring hope, undaunted faith, and inclusive love?

What we, who have aligned ourselves with Jesus, know is that the kingdoms of this world, built on the illusion of scarcity, built on benefitting the few at the expense of the many, built on the love of power and the capacity for corruption, are no match for the kingdom of God, which is built on the truth of abundance, built on divine grace which privileges no one over anyone, built on true justice and extravagant mercy. What we know is that our true citizenship is in God's kingdom, (Philippians 3:20), and therefore, our life together is crafted in accord with its constitution, which is not about obeying a set of rules, but about joyfully responding to the self-giving love of God made real in Jesus Christ.

We are living worthy of the gospel of Christ as a congregation if we are embodying the love of Jesus and the joy of being his family in the ways we do church together. We are living worthy of the gospel of Christ as a congregation if we are witnessing with our words and our deeds to God's vision of a world where peace arises from justice and justice is aligned with mercy.

We know something else as well, and that is that living our life together in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ does not come easily to us. Even in a smaller membership church like ours, and especially as we work on being church during this pandemic, there is so much to handle that doesn't appear to directly pertain to being worthy of the gospel of Christ. And besides, the whole idea that we can organize our life together to make it worthy of the gospel seems like too tall of an order. To which I respond, that's exactly right. It is beyond our ability to achieve. But it is well within God's ability to enable. God knows the need the world has for churches to embody the good news of Jesus. God knows that the good news must be both proclaimed and lived if it is to have its desired impact in the world. So God is at work right here, right now, among us, making it possible for us to be worthy stewards of the gospel.

I want to believe that God's is injecting grace and guidance into every aspect of our life together. In our suppers, in our meetings, in our organizing and planning, God is quietly but persistently at work, helping us do whatever it is that we do in ways that make us worthy of the gospel. Our job is to notice God's presence, God's grace, God's guidance, and to let ourselves be carried along with it. Our everyday life together as a congregation, even one scattered by the pandemic, is worthy of the gospel because God is making us worthy. All we need to do is get on board with what God is making possible.