



Daily Meditations September 9-14, 2019

The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 1 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Traci Maxwell, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T.Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.

Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.

COLLECT, PROPER 18:

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts, for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Find Joy in the Story You are Living Monday, September 9, 2019

Philippians 1:1-11

"I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now."

For this letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul writes from prison, but you almost wouldn't know that, given the upbeat nature of what he has to say. Some commentators call this his letter of rejoicing, and an odd thing to find him doing from behind bars. In an instance of pure coincidence, I happened upon a quote posted on Facebook by Woodcreek City Councilwoman Cyndi Jackson the other evening, a quote from a woman named Rachel M. Martin. Here is what it says: "Sometimes you have to let go of the picture of what you thought it would be like and learn to find joy in the story you are actually living."

Paul's views come from a deeply felt optimism that the gospel was being spread and lived even without him being present. I know what most prisons are like in this day and age, and I can only imagine what they were like in the time of Paul, and for him to look out and find joy in that situation is something of a miracle, I'd say. It's particularly interesting because Paul is not behind bars for some petty criminal act. He's there because of what he believes; he is a political prisoner. So, as I think of him there, I marvel at his strength of character, his utter willingness to sacrifice for the good of others, his faith. So, I wonder sometimes whether, if the powers-that-be were jailing people because of their faith in Christ, I would be among them. Or would I be like Peter and thrice deny him?

We live in perilous times, going to prison for holding the wrong belief or for protesting (say, the construction of a pipeline that endangers the Hill Country's most precious resource) is not out of the question. In Hong Kong, a scene is

playing out that involves jailing 100s and hurting 1000s because they believe in freedom and justice. The time approaches when we might find ourselves in Paul's position. What joy will we be able to glean from the experience?

To Choose Your Path

Tuesday, September 10, 2019

Philippians 1:12-30

"I am caught between the two."

In these verses, we find a poignant peek into the mind of Paul as he talks to himself about his relationship with Christ and how he expresses his feelings about that relationship. He wonders, first, if he is up to the difficulties of imprisonment. Will he persevere without shaming himself? And then he reflects on whether he should live or die. Of course, he knows eventually he must die, but here the question is more urgent. "For," he writes, "to me life is Christ, and death is gain." He longs to die and be with Christ. But he decides, as if in the moment, that he must go on in life to give hope and promise to the living. To go on living means further strife, more prison time, deprivation. But it also means spreading the words of a loving Christ who promises little in the way of creature comforts and, in fact, sometimes the opposite.

Many today don't and won't understand what following Christ requires. They go on the path paved by heretics like Joel Osteen. They may talk the talk, but they don't walk the walk, and their choices have nothing to do with being Christ (as Father Phil Mason might say). Life is about choices, choices we make and choices others make for us. Various paths are laid out for us. Paul knows the path he's on leads to suffering. After all, the way of Christ led to the cross. The ultimate question all of us face is: *Which way shall we go?*

It's as if Christ Never Lived.

Wednesday, September 11, 2019

Philippians 2:1-11

"Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others."

Given the times in which we live, isn't this all very quaint and old-fashioned? And how about this for words that seem the very embodiment of anachronism:

"Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."

We've entered a new phase of American life defined by avarice, prevarications, the elevation of the elite, their boot heels on the necks of the down-trodden, violence against the less fortunate and "the other" perpetrated at the highest levels of government. Success, as defined by our political and social leaders is quantified in our offshore bank accounts and how many accounts of child abuse and mistreatment of women and people who are different because of the color of the skin or their sexual preference or their place of birth we can cover up and hide. It is as if Christ never lived (unless it's that time of year when we burst through the doors of Wal-Mart and Costco to start buying stuff we don't need at prices we can't afford for people who, truth be known, probably couldn't care less). It is fortunate Paul's words were written down. Maybe they will be passed on to generations who will rediscover what it means to be alive in Christ. For now, I'm not very optimistic. The joy of Paul eludes me.

Walk the Walk

Thursday, September 12, 2019

Philippians 2:12-30

"Do everything without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world, as you hold onto the word of life, so that my boast for the day of Christ may be that I did not run in vain or labor in vain."

And so, if I take these words to heart, I cannot just walk away and say, "The joy of Paul eludes me." If I am to be a Christian, I must act like it. In so far as it is possible, I must be Christ-like even if only so that my "boast for the day of Christ may be that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." The Book of James reminds us of this as well, as we are advised that faith without works is dead. Unfortunately, I find that as I grow older, I have no interest and no time to argue over this overarching truth. I've got to walk the walk. As my parents used to say when necessary: "Your actions speak far louder than your words."

How, then, are we to live? Paul lays it out. He lays it out in Philippians. He lays it out in Romans and Colossians and every letter. We can fight all day long over what Paul said about this and that and what Christ said about this and that, but how did they live? What did they do? It's not hard to get; it's hard to do. That's why Paul emphasizes the value of communities of Christians like the Philippians who can brace each other, take care of each other, and treat one another and strangers with respect. My grandparents and my parents taught me how to live honorably, and they didn't call much on the New Testament to do so. You don't need a Bible or a letter from Paul to live honorably. But, having them there with you sure can't hurt in a time when finding people of honor seems so hard to do.

Sacrifice, Steadfastness, Honor

Friday, September 13, 2019

Philippians 3:1-16

"Beware of the dogs! Beware of the evil workers!"

Few words are more pertinent to our times. The false prophets are more insidious than ever before in human history, thanks to social media and the death of the fairness doctrine in broadcasting and the vast injection of wealth into human political and social endeavors. How they would scorn Paul for this admission: "For his sake, I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ..." What would I lose in the pursuit of righteousness? What would I gain? The calculus is not complicated. It involves sacrifice. It involves steadfastness. It involves honor. Where am I to look to find examples worthy of the effort? I find the words of Paul comforting if also challenging. I was fortunate to be raised by people who believed you pursued what was Right because doing so had its own reward. That sounds sectarian, but I'd settle these days for even a good secular representative my children and grandchildren might emulate -- because in the darkness of my nights I see few other possibilities.

What Kind of Extremist are You?

Saturday, September 14, 2019

Philippians 3:17 - 4:7

"Join with others in being imitators of me, brothers, and observe those who thus conduct themselves according to the model you have in us. For many, as I have often told you and now tell you even in tears, conduct themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction. Their God is their stomach; their glory is in their 'shame.' Their minds are occupied with earthly things."

For the good of the planet and for ourselves and those who come after us, I believe we must take this invitation seriously, even if in the overall scheme of things we are few and becoming fewer. How, then, should we live? Here are a couple of lists that would start us on our way. The first list is of corporal works of mercy:

- To feed the hungry.
- To give water to the thirsty.
- To clothe the naked.
- To shelter the homeless.
- To visit the sick.
- To visit the imprisoned or ransom the captive.
- To bury the dead.

This list is of the spiritual works of mercy:

- To instruct the ignorant.
- To counsel the doubtful.
- To admonish the sinners.
- To bear patiently those who wrong us.
- To forgive offenses.
- To comfort the afflicted.
- To pray for the living and dead.

The way forward for Paul was clear in this letter. He had reconciled himself to a life at the extreme end of the spectrum. When I think of Paul's letters from prison, I find myself re-reading that famous letter written from the Birmingham Jail by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a letter in which he made no apologies for fighting the good fight on the pathway established by Jesus. Let me end with these words from that letter.

"But as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love? -- 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice? -- 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? -- 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.' Was not Martin Luther an extremist? -- 'Here I stand; I can do no other so help me God.' Was not John Bunyan an extremist? -- 'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a mockery of my conscience.' Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? -- 'This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.' Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist? -- 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' So, the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?"

How shall I answer those questions? How shall you?

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