

Be the Gospel

Philippians 1:21-30

Bette Midler in her song "The Rose" seems to offer a word of rebuke for those who are so afraid of dying that they never learn to live. Paul seemed to have had a moment when he was not sure if he would not rather die than live. Paul's circumstances were dire, facing the real possibility that he would be executed. "For to me living is Christ and dying is gain," "I do not know which I prefer," "I am hard pressed!" "my desire is to depart." But then Paul asked himself ("I do not know!") whether he preferred to remain in the flesh (*sarx*) for fruitful labor or to depart to be with Christ. Paul immediately moved to reject his understandable desire "to depart." Because the selfish "spirituality" of that desire directly contradicted the self-emptying (kenotic) love that animates living, that is Christ. Living that is Christ is so full of love and desire for the other that the idea of desiring death for personal "gain" would never arise. Ours is not to be a "spirituality" that serves selfish desires but a spirituality that delights above all in what is best for others.

William Greenway

We are called to live with hope. Viktor Frankl, the famous psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* presents his thesis on how people find meaning in life and the importance of this fruitful search for a life of hope and joy. In explaining the phenomena of the concentration camps, where hundreds of prisoners acquiesced to dozens of soldiers, Frankl speaks of the loss of hope, which robs people of their will to live and to face life's difficulties. People start dying when they lose hope. That was why the words *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work Creates Freedom), which

adorned the entrance of the first German concentration camp at Dachau, could have more appropriately been replaced by the words from Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Abandon hope, all who enter this place." Frankl speaks of the freedom we possess that helps us determine our attitudes and spiritual well-being. The person who has nothing to live for will lose hope and die quickly. That is what Paul is trying to counteract in this passage. It is God's will that we experience life and not death. We are called to choose life.

Sometimes our eyes are so focused on the sky, waiting for our resurrection and "true life," that we miss in our present life the opportunities for the abundant life to which Christ calls us. We know that tomorrow holds promises of hope and joy. Our God, though, is also in our present, challenging us to look at life and its circumstances through the lens of hope that will bring a song of joy into our life. God has already spoken a word of life on our behalf. This spoken word will help us find hope in the midst of the most difficult situations life will lob at us.

How do we find hope and meaning in life? How are we to be the gospel? It all begins when we are able to look beyond ourselves and our circumstances and help others find meaning. Do we dare believe God's promises that we will experience life and life in abundance if we learn to live a life that trusts God even in the face of our greatest challenges? When those "prison moments" come, we are invited to model for others what it means to face them with hope. **Gilberto Collazo**

Paul addressed the "the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" ([1:1](#)), but this letter is also to the saints of Christ Jesus who are in Swartz Creek. While they *resided* in Philippi, they *live* in Christ. While we worship and reside in the Flint area, we live in Christ. This helps to explain Paul's dilemma about his own fate. He is not preoccupied with the next world to

the neglect of this one; rather, he lets his firm belief in the next world fuel his living in this one. His hope for the Philippians is that they will do the same. His hope for the members of Unity is that we will do the same.

This comes as a refreshing word when modern Christianity is so often preoccupied with heaven-to-come that it is of little earthly good. In their book *Saving Paradise*, coauthors Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker trace how over time Christianity came to focus on a distant afterlife, whereas the early church, following the biblical witness, stressed life here and now. They note, for example, how the three different uses of "eternal life" in John's Gospel all relate to "how life is lived on earth." Unfortunately, a gnostic penchant is alive and well among Christians today, feeding the tendency to look down upon this good earth in which we live. Not so in Paul's theology.

As for our own location today, the distance between the Roman city where the emperor cult was practiced and the average city in North America cannot be measured in miles. The one thing ("only," [v. 27](#)) Paul desires for the Philippians is that they live a life worthy of the gospel. The verb is one more commonly associated with citizenship, only "the behavior required of the Philippians is a reflection of the 'citizenship' they now enjoy as members of the Christian community." **Mike Graves**

So how are we to live faithfully? One thing is that we can be the gospel. We can be and do the things that Jesus did. When people were hungry, he fed them. When people were thirsty, he made sure they were given a cold drink. When people were in trouble, he listened and met their needs. He said to us in Matthew when we feed, clothe, and visit those in need, we are being the gospel. In the September newsletter I shared a poem that I wrote after attending a women's conference...my fear was that I had spent a great

deal of time among people, but not really being the gospel to people. Our task is to slow down and be present with others – showing love and compassion, remembering that we are here to minister to one another and to the world around us. I encourage us to keep up the good works of helping at Carriage Town quarterly, worshipping at American House North, participating in the CROP Walk, providing Christmas gifts for the Angel Tree children, but also find ways to be truly present for these and others in need of a listening ear and a hand of encouragement. We are to be the gospel in each other's lives, here and now. May it be so.

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