

At the heart of our lesson this morning from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi we heard probably the most towering, the most majestic affirmation of the early church as to the pre-existent identity and the cosmic primacy of the Lord Jesus Christ. This statement of faith, probably already current and being sung in the form of a sacred hymn in the local churches, deserves a sermon, or a series of sermons, exploring what it says and what it means, then and now.

But that's not going to be this sermon, this morning. Instead, I'm interested in the context of this affirmation. What's going on in Paul's life as he writes this letter? In their life? What's their relationship? What conclusions, what principles does Paul draw from this grand statement about Christ? What could be motivating him to bring out such big rhetorical guns? What could be so important to Paul about this local church that he writes to them in such a way—and what are the principles he longs for them to hear, to internalize, to remember, to know, to live out together?

What's so important is that Paul loves these people very much. He and Timothy and Silas had brought the gospel to them in the first place, years before—remember Lydia, gathering by the river with the other Jews who heard and responded to the gospel Paul preached—and became the very first convert to Christ in all of Europe—and we get the impression that this was, in the end, still his favorite church of all. He's looking ahead to the day they will need to be surviving without him. It weighs heavily on Paul as he ponders how they will fare; how they will live out their true identity as redeemed believers and a redeemed faith family together; how long and how richly they will persevere in the faith and attract others into the church family and enjoy the blessings of life together in Christ Jesus? Paul's stuck in prison somewhere else, so he decides to write them a letter to share some of his musings, his instructions with them.

It's reassuring that Paul faces some of the same challenges any preacher, any teacher, any parent faces: how to remind, instruct, without appearing to scold? But Paul's positive tone becomes the more clear when we contrast his words to those of Moses when he was in the same position, also about to depart from his congregation [Dt 31-32.] In contrast to Paul's tone, Moses flat out tells them “You've been enough trouble to God and to me while I've been with you. I know you are going to mess up, to wind up cursed once I'm gone. You are going to show yourselves to be a wicked and perverse generation.” And you may also remember, as Paul gently reminds the Philippians not to grumble or complain, that those initial Israelites were famous for murmuring, grumbling. They hadn't been liberated from slavery for six weeks before they were already murmuring, complaining, going negative. “We don't like the food out here. Why did you ever bring us out of our happy homes in Egypt, Moses...?”

In contrast, we hear Paul's confidence that they will continue to persevere together and grow after he's away from them even more than when he was with them. (“Just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but now in my absence...” v 12) He trusts them. He has introduced them to the risen Lord. He has taught them to pray. He believes that they are in touch with the Spirit of that risen Lord; he tells them he prays for them without ceasing and he encourages them to do the same. As long as they keep submitting their lives to the present God with them, the Spirit, Paul knows they are in the very best Hands of all.

So then what might cause him to worry? Maybe if they had become extremely confused and thought maybe somehow Paul had been the Messiah. But Paul had always been careful to protect against that error, knowing that then these churches he founded and nurtured would be cults rather than Christian churches. From the day Paul had met his match on the Road to Damascus and felt the forgiving love of God in Jesus radiate thru him, from the many days and years he had continued to experience the healing and integrating and redeeming love of God in Christ—Paul was quite clear his Savior was Jesus the Christ, never Paul. He trusted this Philippian church could also tell the difference. He knew they knew “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Here comes a second reminder to them once he’s gone: continue to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Paul knew better than almost anyone that our salvation is a gift from God (“it is by grace you have been saved, thru faith...”) so Paul also knew that “God is at work in you...” God is for you; His Spirit is within you to bring you to completion.

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” is a reminder of at least two complementary realities. The *first* of these realities is an individual one: each one of us is responsible for our life of faith, for persevering in Christ. We have everything we need by the grace of God—how silly then it would be for us to get careless, wander away, “nibble ourselves away from the Good Shepherd,” as sheep are wont to do. Paul is not urging them to “work *for* their own salvation”—instead to keep living consistently with the reality in the risen Christ they have known and experienced. “Stay the course,” he’s telling them. This sounds simple—but how many times do we each one of us still need to be reminded even today, knowing all that we know, to keep allowing the Holy Spirit of God to guide us in all the affairs and aspects of our lives. Far too much is at stake for us to take back control of our lives and to quit working out our salvation thru moment-to-moment glad submission to the Holy Spirit of God.

(The knowledge of God and the experience of His mercy will surely lead to good works done. Our salvation, our new life on God’s side, is absolutely a gift from God—but there’s also a lot of talk in these few verses here about “work.” (Five references in a few sentences.) God is working thru us; Paul has been laboring for his Lord; we are to “work out our salvation” and also “to work for God’s good pleasure.” We never work our way into God’s favor—but Christ’s mature believers, His Church, is at work all the time living out the gifts he entrusts to us. (Our works are always the effect of His saving grace, never the cause.)

The *second* reality Paul meant is a corporate or collective reminder. A congregation has a destiny and a calling and a God-assigned purpose just as each believer has one, and every one of us has our unique part to play in the life of Christ’s Church. Paul loved this entire Philippian church—not just one or several of the people in it. At least some had apparently drifted into an attitude of “I’m in it for myself because it’s all about me” which is what prompted him to write this letter when and as he did. (It’s never good when your Synteche is not getting along with your Euodia!) [4:2] Paul is calling all of them to put lesser things aside, to remember they we’re all in it together, and that in some sense the entire church shares a common destiny.

This collective spirit is clearly addressed in the specific advice we heard: “Do all things without murmuring or whining or bickering...” These are the specific attitudes which weaken the church as a whole. A divided, negative church is going to discourage

every one of its members. (Bickering, squabbling, being negative sound like fairly small things, compared to dramatic ills, say, to worldwide terrorism or global warming or election campaign reform or even murder or assault or burglary. But Paul knew these are the exact kinds of undramatic ways a church gets discouraged, just as far more marriages go sour from undramatic day-to-day negativity, lack of respect, taking the other for granted, thoughtless comments or put-downs than from full-blown extra-marital affairs. In tending to these apparently minor, repetitive details and habits we build strong foundations together.)

Curious—Paul’s emphasis here to the church is on “being,” not “doing.” No mention of the activities, the programs, not on the grand projects the church is to complete. The church is to be positive, connected, supportive—mutually and completely invested—as a perpetual attitude, a matter of habit, in all their life together. And not just “church” activities, but wherever they went, whatever they did. They were the church; we are the church—all seven days, wherever we go, whatever we do. In “all things” we are to have the mind of Christ, who gave Himself for others.

We are to be “blameless” “and innocent” together, and not for our own sake only (you remember—not without fault or personality or color—but striving to be faithful, to forgive, to reconcile, to be yielded to God more and more fully). Our purpose is “to shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.”

A star shines in the dark night sky. Not by striving, not by advertising campaign or P.R. blitz—a star just being a star lights up the dark. It impacts its environment just by being what it is. Insofar as we simply “be” Christ’s Church truly, have the same mind which was in Him, encourage and support one another, live our lives with integrity and grace and boldness and trust as Jesus did His, we also will influence others. It cannot be helped; it will come about.

Our church, as you all know, is never just “about us.” Imagine how sad Paul would have been—because he knew so closely the heart of our Lord Jesus, who gave Himself that others might come into His love, into His Church—how sad Paul would have been overhearing the business manager of the large church who dragged his pastor into the narthex of the church building on a Friday afternoon to show off the newly waxed and polished, pristine floor. “Too bad it’ll be all scuffed up again after Sunday.” Or the woman who quit worshiping at her church, saying “It just isn’t the same any more. I used to know everybody, and I used to have some space in the pew to myself. There are too many people now. I like it how it used to be.”

I know you all recognize how insulting these attitudes are to Jesus, who gave His life in order for His Church to bear much fruit; who commissioned His followers to go and “become fishers of women and men;” to go forth into all the world, into all nations, baptizing and making disciples...” which involves Christian nurture and teaching and genuine, stand-out-from-the-world-all-around-them Christian churches, like this one. So we keep working out our salvation together—mindful that we’re all in it together; mindful that every Sunday morning you’re within 30 miles and you’re here to worship God, you’re strengthening your church family and pleasing God. Every time you freely offer your gifts and tithe your time and your conversation, you’re strengthening your church family and pleasing God. Every time you accept responsibility and keep your word, you’re strengthening your church family and pleasing God. Every time you manage the incredible juggling act of getting away for a Retreat to strengthen and

encourage one another and to grow to know and love each other with deeper bonds in Christ, as about twenty of our women are doing this weekend, you are strengthening your church family and pleasing God. Every time you serve the illiterate, the widow, the orphan, the alien for the sake of Christ, you're strengthening your church family and pleasing God. Every time you manage to prune away lesser priorities in order to make and keep time for prayer you're strengthening your church family and pleasing your God. We're all in this together, "for it's God at work in all of us, allowing us to choose and to enjoy and to apply ourselves and to invest ourselves for His good pleasure."

This brings us to another of Paul's underlying principles. The main reason we live together as "church" is to work and live, individually and together, for *God's* good pleasure. I don't know how to say this any other way. (I am very grateful that you in this church mostly are not shocked and disappointed by this simple reality, but I'm afraid it might keep some of our neighbors from coming back a second time.) The whole point of church is to work together for God's good pleasure? So that God gets to be happy? So that God is glorified, God's purposes accomplished? It's not about my needs, my growth, my children's spiritual foundation, my deciding how tired I am and therefore whether I feel like showing up to worship, my making new friendships? It's not about my choosing, my happiness, my blessing?

Actually—yes, it is about some of those things, too—but our growth, our obedience, the depth of our friendships, our lives made straight which used to be crooked, our lives joyful and contagious to others with the warm backlight of the love of Jesus shining out into the darkness—all these beautiful effects are exactly what please and delight God our Savior, the Cause. (Who wants to be part of a crabby, complaining church full of people who thought the point was to come if and when we feel like it, to use other people and their resources to get our personal needs met, to come and hear what we want to hear—never mind what the living God asks of us, or what all of us together might do and become for His sake. (It would have to be one very lame God who was pleased by such a sorry spectacle, and I'm glad most of you, this church, want no part of this!))

You understand—everything is at stake in what Paul is writing. You know, as those Philippians did, that "church" is never just about this one hour Sunday morning. "Church" is shorthand for the sum of our families, our careers, our deepest loves and friendships, our discovering God's purpose for our lives, for our eternal identity and destiny all together. "Church" means we recognize life is not a "do-it-yourself" affair—our blessing will come as we obey the living God in Christ and as we commit to others also committed to our Savior in something like the same way. (No less than this sort of understanding could cause Paul to urge the church to "work out your salvation 'with fear and trembling.'" This expression occurs many times in the Old Testament. We do not have to be Biblical scholars to know Paul has something much more in mind than "pretend church." Paul is not talking about filling in a little box when you check into the hospital which says, "Methodist or Catholic;" "tuna sandwich or fruit plate." "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling" because you are dealing with nothing less than the Creator and Master of the universe, the LORD of heaven and earth—God help us if ever we forget.)

To sum up: “Dear Philippian sisters and brothers in Christ, I am so sorry some of you had forgotten who you are, and had begun to treat church as an incidental: as no more significant than your casual relationships. Remember who Jesus is; remember all He has done that you might be made new, and therefore enjoy relationships of depth and joy and love in Him and in each other. Remember His Church is not just about you—because it’s about Him, you are never to settle for taking up space, acting small. Your mission is to give your very best devotion to Him and therefore to each other, His very own family. And I am so glad, dear friends at Philippi, that you understand this, and that you are going to be just fine in my absence.”

And here we begin to sneak up on perhaps the strangest truth of all. Paul and this church are “in it together”—and not only because they are so fond of each other. If that were the case, distance would eventually diminish their relationship. More important to Paul than their mutual affection—as much as that means to him—is that he and this church have been and will continue to support one another as they have served their Lord and strengthened His church. They have supported him in so many ways, including even during his imprisonment; he has poured so much of God’s love into them; they have responded in kind.

But now he reminds them that his own eternal destiny is somehow wrapped up in their faithfulness. The great Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, hero of the faith, pillar of Christ’s church—the great Paul tells them that his eternal destiny is somehow affected by their own. As they continue to live out their faith, their lives, long after he is gone from them, they influence his standing before his Savior. If they stand true and live true in the gospel; if they shine the gospel on to others by the brilliance of their mutual love and example, then Paul will know that his labors for Jesus have not been in vain; he will not have run the race for nothing.

We are all in this together—this life, this Church, this world—and for a long time to come, and with bonds we may not yet fully have recognized. Not only do our covenant decisions and “church” choices such as attendance at worship and small groups affect our sisters and brothers—it’s not just about us from Sunday to Sunday, year to year—but now we hear that how we treat each other in Christ’s Church somehow affects their destiny. Paul wanted the Church to know that his eternal status before His Lord Jesus was somehow limited if they chose not to live out what they knew. His stock rose as they obeyed Christ; they held him back if they wandered. Did you know “we were in it together” to this extent?

This is all part of the risk we embrace when we side with Jesus: Paul knew better than any of us that He is Lord not only of this world; we are ambassadors of a Lord who will be vindicated only later. The world may laugh at us in the meantime, but this is nothing new to Jesus—“He could save others, let’s see if He can come down off that cross and save Himself?”

This is part of what it means to follow Jesus: after all, He is the One who chose to obey the Father no matter what; to work out His salvation in this world with fear and trembling [if you will] and in pain and suffering (along with great love and joy shared with His followers, of course)—He is the One who obeyed the way of loss, of sadness, of humiliation, of cruelty, of torture, of death, the way of the cross—and all this before He knew where His faithfulness would lead. Jesus knew only what we also may know: but at every step of His way He kept making the choice to obey the Father, even when, as far

as He knew, His death on the cross would lead to a cave of terminal darkness, not to a tunnel into eternal light. [K Barth's phrase]

This is also the way Paul chose to live; he had exchanged his bright religious career for beatings and jail; for all he knew all his time and trust and work and hopes invested in that Philippian church might end up for naught. But as long as he loved his Lord he had no other hope, no other desire. He lived for the good pleasure of God, and to be deployed by His Savior Jesus Christ to help accomplish His mission—to build up His Church.

He lived his life not as an egomaniac who needed their devotion, but as a faithful servant who kept yearning to see them continue to live more and more into the riches of their identity in Christ. He felt he would always be somehow incomplete in his life as long as they were content to remain incomplete in their collective life “in Christ.”

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we too belong one to another, now and forever. We belong to Jesus. We live, as Paul did, for the good pleasure of God. We live in obedience to Jesus Christ the Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen

### **Philippians 2:5-16**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.