

20

Sep

Striving Side by Side

Pressing On

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

One of the key points to remember throughout this series is that we are not called to wear ourselves out. Pressing on is not about throwing ourselves against brick walls with no regard for our own well-being.

REFERENCES

Exodus 16:2-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: **Philippians 1:21-30**

Does the fact that Paul writes this letter from prison add an important dimension to the words we will reflect upon in this series? Next week, when he asks us to have the same mind as Christ, does that feel different knowing he is incarcerated by the empire? In week three, when he tells us his story of suffering and of privilege, does it land differently because he speaks from a position of being bound? And in the final week, when he tells us to rejoice—and not just rejoice but rejoice always—do the echoes of that proclamation through the bars of his cell ring more profoundly?

He begins this epistle by reminding the believers in Philippi that he is praying for them—from prison. He prays for them, and by extension, for us. In our text for this week, he wrestles with life and death. That's understandable, perhaps, except his isn't the usual prison despair, but an inner debate about the purpose of faith and life. It's stunning, and it's especially stunning when we realize that his decision to stay is so that he can be in service to others. It is not his own good that drives him, but that of the flock that follows him, including this group from Philippi. He writes from prison that he is motivated to live and work for the cause of Christ because of them.

And let's not assume that he was contemplating ending his life in prison, but that he was considering surrendering his ministry and waiting for the sentence to be pronounced against him, which it ultimately was. No one would have faulted him for sitting back and worrying about his fate. No one would have blamed him for being concerned about the state of his soul in these perhaps final moments of freedom and life itself. Instead, he sets himself aside to continue encouraging the church and building up the body.

So how shall we respond to this act of self-sacrifice? Paul asks the Philippians to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil 1:27 NRSVUE^[1]) “Live your life,” he says. Live it well, as Christ would have you live. But there are signs that this was more than simply being good boys and girls. First, there is the call to unity. A life worthy of the gospel is a life lived in community, in shared mission and ministry. Striving side by side is not a byproduct of the gospel; it is in the very design. This unity, this shared striving, is where the strength comes from—the strength to stand against those who would oppose the mission.

Enemies: a complicated word. Some of us don't think we have enemies. Others see their mission is to conquer enemies, destroy enemies, vanquish enemies. But Paul doesn't give permission to do that here. Instead, he suggests that faith and unity are protection against enemies. “To not be intimidated by those who oppose” is the way we read it here. It's about perseverance and commitment to the cause of Christ, regardless of the obstacles. It's a reminder that the best way to do this is together. Striving side by side while we stand together is what Paul looks for.

“Striving while we live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel” sounds like just getting on with it, or, as a famous shoe manufacturer says, “Just do it!” It's that, but more. The word here is “*polituesthe*”- “live your life.” Look again, it is the word we get *politics* from. Some translate the word as “conduct yourselves as a citizen” in a manner worthy of the gospel. But we're not supposed to get political, we're told. The worlds are separate, we hear. Just deal with faith stuff, spirit stuff, and not political stuff.

Paul's argument is that there is no separation. How you conduct yourself as a citizen is a faith issue. If the spiritual dimension of your life never leaks into the political dimension, what good is it? If your faith in Jesus has no impact on the priorities by which you live, the values you hold, the causes you support, then is it really transforming? Is it really sanctifying if it never changes how you live? This is not a call to be partisan, to promote a party or a candidate, but a call to let your faith and the community within which you live and work and grow together guide you in living life in human society. We are called, invited, and encouraged to strive side by side for the kingdom of God as envisioned by the one we follow. We let the gospel be the measure by which our lives are shaped. And we press on.

Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, served churches in Indiana, Arkansas, and the British Methodist Church. His PhD in preaching and media is from the University of Edinburgh. He has taught preaching in seminary and conference settings for more than twenty years.

//

Notice at collection

Your Privacy Choices

