

Sermon on Philippians 1: 1-18a

Crossroads UCC – May 6, 2018

(It's not really fair: a few weeks ago Julia got Paul, the slave girl, and the jailor and today I get "Greetings, everyone in Philippi"!)

In this letter, after greeting everyone in the church in Philippi – of whom Paul seems very, genuinely fond – Paul hastens to reassure them that although he is in prison (which they seem to have known), he is all right. In fact, his imprisonment has been a good thing, because the whole imperial guard, and others, know he has been imprisoned for Christ. His imprisonment is helping him spread the good news. Indeed, other followers have been emboldened by his boldness and are speaking out for Christ also. There are some who are spreading the word to taunt Paul, he says, but as long as Christ is being proclaimed, the motives aren't important.

This struck me as a little odd, since Paul doesn't tend to be all that open to those who spread doctrine with which he disagrees – so probably these people who are proclaiming the gospel with malicious intent are personal rivals of Paul rather than evangelists preaching a rival gospel. "Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice."

This is Paul in prison, heading toward martyrdom. He is writing, as always, to people for whom proclaiming Christ could be dangerous. Proclaiming Christ – not just quietly believing while blending in with the rest of the population, but speaking boldly, setting yourself against the beliefs and practices of the rest of the population – this could get you thrown in prison, kicked out of town, even killed. Being a Christian at the time of Paul was not safe.

The gospels give us Jesus's radical, revolutionary message of love. The message is counter-cultural because it runs counter to our instinctive self-oriented, own-family-oriented, tribe-oriented feelings. "Love **everybody**," Jesus says. "Help **everybody**." "Forgive." "It is more important to love and help others than it is to be rich or successful or even contented." Crazy talk. But as people heard it and saw him live it the truth and glory of that message filled them and they followed him. Even after his death, the weird, compelling truth lived on. So they continued to believe and proclaim.

The rest of the New Testament is the story of how that message was spread. There is explanation, gloss, explication, interpretation of Jesus's message, of course. Some of that is working out of ideas. Some is trying to explain, to justify, what is known to be true and right but that doesn't really make *sense*. But all of it, all the rest of the New Testament, is about holding fast to and spreading the gospel of Jesus in a world hostile to his message. It is about how to live when you could be called upon to die – horribly – at any time.

Any group in that situation – suffering for their beliefs, suffering for their God – cling to the same basic messages: We are special. God loves us specially. There is more than this: heaven, Palestine, the next life. God is with us in our sufferings. We will be rewarded, somehow, because God sees what we are enduring for God.

People being persecuted for their beliefs need reasons to hold to those beliefs.

But! Here's the thing: we Christians in America are *not* being persecuted for our beliefs.

In 313, Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of Christians and in 380 Christianity was established as the state religion of the Roman Empire. It was carried far and enshrined as the belief system people

were to follow. It was codified and creeded. This was huge. No longer could you be imprisoned or killed for following Jesus. (In fact, eventually you could be imprisoned or killed for *not* following Jesus!) The instruction “make Christians of all nations” had been carried out. We won.

The trouble was, when the state allied itself so completely with Christianity, Christianity became allied with the state. It became part of the dominion the government had over its citizens. Opposing the state included opposing Christianity. Supporting the state included supporting Christianity. But because the conversion of the **state** to Christianity did not necessarily encompass the conversion of each individual member of the state to the radical, revolutionary doctrine of loving, helping, and forgiving that Jesus taught, Christianity was unmoored from its core. People’s own natural, instinctive, self-oriented, own-family-oriented, tribe-oriented feelings continued to direct them,, but directed them under the guise or name of Christianity. “Christian nations” were not – are not – nations devoted to love, to helping everyone, to ensuring that all were cared for, to forgiveness. “Christina nations” were – are – regular geopolitical establishments in which people went to Christian churches and recited Christian creeds. Some people embraced and took these creeds seriously. Some did not. But they were “Christians”.

This is the world in which I grew up. I’m not really knocking it – I can barely imagine any other. I’m not sure how I would exercise my faith if I knew I was risking death in doing so. And I recognize that this is not the situation everywhere. There **are** places where people are killed for being Christians. But not here.

Still, the largest part of the New Testament, the largest part of the holy writ by which we are to live, was written for people at risk. It tells us how to be besieged. It assumes we are opposed. It does not tell us how not to besiege. It does not tell us how not to oppose. And because that is the narrative in which people who want to faithful live, that is the way many Christians see themselves. This worldview requires us to find – or invent – enemies to struggle against. This is the phenomenon that gave us the notion of the “war on Christmas”. This is what leads Christians in American – who are not persecuted for their faith – to think that in solidarity with Christina in Muslim nations who are persecuted for their faith they should restrict and persecute Muslims.

It’s a difficult problem: if your narrative defines you as oppressed but you aren’t oppressed, who are you? What are you? How do you fit in your narrative? How do you define yourself?

In response to this, many liberal Christians step back. We are reluctant to claim “Christianity” because we don’t really know how to avoid the somewhat oppressive or false-feeling tactics of those Christians within the “victim” mode. (We don’t want to grab converts by threatening Hell – as Julia talked about last week.) What is called Christianity becomes a means of dictating people’s behavior, not because they believe certain behaviors are pleasing to God, but because someone has made a rule or law people must follow. (I have a friend who grew up in a Catholic family. She has a sister who was born mentally handicapped. This was very difficult for their mother, both emotionally and physically, and she went to her priest to beg to be able to use birth control, because she was terrified to have more children. The priest told her she could not. That lost my friend. She is hostile to the church and probably always will be.)

The more people turn away from the church, from traditional religion, the more those invested in that religion, in the dominion of their belief system over the lives of all, try to tighten their grasp. They try to tie the government ever closer to the church. Religion becomes only about forms, about creeds, about the tribe. It becomes far more about *you* shouldn’t do instead of what *I* do do. This gives rise to the Tea Party, to politicians having affairs while legislating “family values”. And too often our instinctive self-orientation leads us to put our own interests first, but claim – perhaps even believe – that since we are “good Christians” our interests are Christ’s interests.

At the same time, there are good people trying to be faithful to Christ. Sometimes this leads them to questioning. Sometimes it leads them to supporting laws, doctrines, and leaders because those leaders claim the mantle of Christ.

It's a mess!

So what do we do?

This is where it gets harder for me, because I don't have any easy answers. But I think we need to reclaim Jesus, not as a stick to beat others with, but as a standard for ourselves. As Paul sat in prison, how did he gather new followers of Christ? His serene lack of fear in the face of authority, his continued preaching of the love of God even as he faced punishment, showed people something they wanted for themselves. The early church tried to love people, to forgive people, to help people – and people wanted to be part of that. We need to care for people – and claim Jesus as we do so. We need to love people – and claim Jesus as we do so. We need to speak truth to power – and claim Jesus as we do so. We need to remind ourselves and others that being a follower of Christ tell us what **we** must do – it does not allow us to tell others what they must do. Jesus met people where they were and invited them to be better. He showed them what better looked like. I think that's what we need to do.

I've questioned . . . perhaps rejected . . . much of our scripture for today, along with the victim mentality engendered by passages like it. But one thing Paul says **is** helpful, so I want to close with it:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Let us pray: Loving God, you have blessed us beyond all imagining. With that blessing you have challenged us – to use what you have given us to make the world better – to bring your kingdom. Help us to follow your instruction to love, to forgive, to help. Help us to live so that people see Christ in us. Amen.