

“This is My Prayer”

Philippians 1: 1-30

For the next few weeks, we will be taking a look at the letter of Philippians. It is one of the shortest books in the Bible, but within these few chapters, lies words of wisdom for us as people of faith.

I want to give us a little background on this letter so that we have a better understanding of the significance and impact these words of wisdom really have for us as we continue our journeys of faith. Paul writes this letter while he is in prison. And let me say, I'm using the word prison loosely. We are probably imagining Paul sitting in a jail cell, behind bars. However, more than likely, where Paul was being held was a pit of some sort, where there was perpetual darkness, overcrowding, lack of sanitation, insufficient food and disease.

The conditions Paul finds himself in while writing this letter are deplorable and so inhumane that no one really survived for long. The only way out was either through execution or release, opportunities for the first, happened frequently, opportunities for the second, release, happened far and few between. The only hope of surviving this place was found in relying on others living on outside who could and would bring supplies. Without friends bringing food or other necessities, a person who was in these types of prisons would either die or go insane.

This is the situation that Paul finds himself in when he is writing this letter. It is fascinating to think that Paul writes this letter which is so full of thanksgiving and joy during what had to be one of his darkest moments in ministry. Instead of whining and complaining about his situation, Paul gives thanksgiving to God. He celebrates all he has endured for the sake of the Gospel. Paul rejoices in the Lord, reminding the Philippians that through Christ, he can do all things. Instead of bemoaning his fate, Paul offers up a prayer on behalf of the community in Philippi.

It is this prayer that sets the tone for Paul's ministry in Philippi and other places. With this prayer, Paul reminds them and us that our whole lives have been transformed by the Gospel message and the grace of that gift doesn't stop there. It continues on and on. It is Paul's hope and his prayer that the Gospel message, the transformative word of God's love and God's grace, continues to grow in the hearts of those at Philippi each and every day. It is his hope and his prayer that their love for each other and for all of God's children continues to grow more and more each day. It is Paul's hope and his prayer that as people of faith, they continue to grow in Christ through more wisdom and insight so that they become the people God created and called them to be.

Now, let me stop right there, I know this all sounds really good preacher talk but what do we really mean when we say all this? We've all heard me use that phrase "become the people God created us and calls us to be" but I've never really

given us a point by point presentation of what this phrase means for us as people of faith. How are we supposed to be the people God created us and calls us to be if we don't know what it really means?

Because, let's face it, that's the heart of the matter isn't? That's why we practice our faith. That's why we gather for worship. That's why we are people of faith in the first place right? We want to know what it looks like, what it means for us to become the people God created us and calls us to be. We want to know how to live this out in our lives. We want to know how to authentically live out our faith, to live out the call of the transformative Gospel, the gospel that tells us of God's love and grace, we want to know how to be a person who brings healing and wholeness to God's creation, right? We want to know that these are not just nice words, churchy words, words the preacher pulls out to fill up and finish a sermon for Sunday. We practice our faith because we want to know how to become the people God created us and calls us to be. We practice our faith because we have had an experience with the love and grace of God. We have been changed. We know that there is more to be had: more hope, more mercy, more justice. We believe that one day God's peaceable kingdom will be a reality for us here on earth and we will work towards this vision to come to fruition each and every day. We believe we can become the people God created us and calls us to be. We just don't know how.

When we ask questions like this, what we are really trying to figure out is our identity and our purpose as people of faith, just like Christians have been doing for two thousand years. For us to begin figuring things out, just like all the people of faith who came before us have tried to do for generations, for us to begin figuring out our identity and purpose as people of faith, we don't have to look much farther than Paul's prayer to find the answers. Paul says: "this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. With just these few sentences, we know all we need to know about our identity and purpose as people of faith. In just these few sentences, we know what it means to be the person God created us and calls us to be.

Let me explain: This past Wednesday, I spent all day with a group of ministers who have been charged with the task of coming up with a plan for restructuring our Region. Easy right? Oh, I forgot to mention that we are supposed to have this plan put together to present it to the Regional Board by May. As I said, easy right? I'm sure everyone who has been involved in these types of conversations know how quickly things come together.

Okay, like I was saying, I was in this meeting, listening to everyone talk about what the Region should do and how the Region should live out its mission when I realized that what we really are trying to figure out is what is the Region's identity and purpose for the world today.

And as simple as that sounds, it was at this point in the conversation that we all got bogged down in the details until someone finally said, "You know, maybe we have been asking the wrong questions all along. Maybe instead, what we should be asking is what our congregations would be missing out on if the Christian Church of KY didn't exist? What would be missing from the Body of Christ if there was in Christian Church in KY? When we asked the questions of identity and purpose this way, the vision began to become clearer. Once we had this in our minds, and once we could answer this question, we knew which direction we needed to take the conversation.

This idea, of flipping the question, is essentially the essence of Paul's prayer. What would our community, our world be like if we as people of faith, as children of God, as ones whose love is supposed to grow more and more with knowledge and insight, what would our world, our community look like if we didn't exist? Take a moment and think about this. If Midway Christian church didn't exist, what would the community of Midway look like? If we as individual believers hadn't

accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ in our hearts, how would our lives be different? What would be missing from the Body of Christ if we didn't exist?

You see, the funny thing is, people say all churches are the same. If you've been to one, you've to them all. People also say that believers of Jesus Christ think the same way, act the same way, speak the same way. But they are wrong.

Each of us have been given specific talents and gifts to use to build up the Body of Christ here on earth. If we did not use these gifts, if we did not use these talents, the Body of Christ would be lacking and unable to become what God created it and calls it to be.

That's why we journey as we explore our faith, to discover who we are, to discover what specifically God has called us to do. It is a process that invites us to discover where God is working in our lives. It is a process that invites us to participate in God's on-going creative building of God's Kingdom here on earth. It is a process that invites us to figure out who God created us and calls us to be

Because once we know that, once we have figured out our identity and purpose as people of faith, we can begin the process of building the Kingdom of God here on earth for all the people of God.

You see, once Paul realized his purpose, realized who God had created him and called him to be, he realized that he could not go back. Even while sitting in

the darkest, grossest pit ever imagined, Paul would not have changed a thing. Too much had changed for him. He had been changed. He had been transformed.

Sure life would have been easier for him if he hadn't claim his identity, his purpose as a person of faith. For one thing, he wouldn't have been sitting in that nasty prison. He would have probably had a completely different life. He probably would have still been a successful lawyer, still would have been a well-received public figure. If Paul had not claimed his identity and purpose as a disciple of Christ, if he had not become the person God created him or called him to be, Paul probably would have still been welcomed by the town officials when he came into town. But not now. Things have changed. Instead now, usually when Paul comes into a town, the officials put him under watch or try to run him out of town before he can cause any problems. Things have changed for Paul because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And because he has been changed, because he has been transformed the Body of Christ was strengthened here on earth.

Paul knew that life would have been so much easier if he had not become the person God created him or called him to be except...except that he knew if he had not, he would have only been living a half-life. He would not have been living out his life authentically in any shape or form. If he had just ignored his call to the Gospel, ignored the transformative power of God's love and grace, he probably would have had a much easier life but he would not have been staying true to who

God created him or called him to be. He would not have been truly claiming his identity as a disciple of Christ. He would not have been a part of the process of bringing God's peaceable Kingdom to earth.

Now for some, they would say Paul's identity and his purpose in faith involved spreading the Gospel message, going place to place, evangelizing. I would argue that was only part of his faith identity, only part of his faith purpose as a disciple of Christ. I would argue that even Paul would say that he became the person God created him and called him to be when he offered this prayer, this prayer which is rooted in living a life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, a gospel that is not full of power and might but a gospel that is for the least of these, a gospel that is not for advancing one's career at the expense of others but a gospel where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Paul became the person God created him and called him to be when he offered up this prayer as a reminder for the Philippians and for us as modern day disciples that we are to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, a gospel that does not promote privilege and accolades but rather is a gospel that takes the form of a servant, that works for justice for the poor, a gospel where all are embraced as a child of God.

This is the heart of our prayer. This is the heart of our purpose. This is why God created us and calls us to work for God's kingdom here on earth. When we live lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, then and only then do we

become the people God created us and calls us to be. Then and only then can we answer the questions of our identity and purpose as people of faith.

So knowing this, may our prayer always be that our love grows more and more each day with wisdom and insight. May our prayer always be that we may all live a life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. May our prayer always be that we become the people God created us and calls us to be. Amen.