



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for September 18, 2022
"Making a Difference: Centered in Christ"
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Philippians 1:19-21

Who We Are

We shift gears this week from considering our Vision to considering our Core Values. The first has to do with our call, the second with our identity.

Our Core Values remind us that we are:

- Christ-centered.
- Bible-based.
- Discipleship-driven.
- Community-oriented.
- Mission-minded.
- and Family focused.

This is who we are.

We've a Story to Tell.

Recently, the Pew Research Center published the results of a study where they attempted to project future religious affiliations in the United States. Their findings confirmed what we already sense to be true, that there is a consistent drift from Christianity.

In fact, the study concludes that by 2070, Christians will make up only 46% of the population, slightly less than a majority. That percentage stands at 63%, down from 78% in 2007.

They predict that a large percentage of the population, 41%, will be comprised of what are called "nones," or those expressing no religious affiliation.

With God's help, we can turn that around. We have a great story to tell, and we'd do well to tell it. The story about Jesus is that those centered in him can't help but be energized for this life and hopeful for the next. There is a winsomeness and power to that we need to champion each and every day.

That's certainly what the Apostle Paul did. His every desire was to lift up Jesus to all who would listen. Above all things, Paul wanted to glorify Christ, by what he did and said, regardless of circumstance.

Let's hear about that sort of thing as we read Philippians 1:19-21

Philippians 1:19-21

For I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Letters from Prison

I have never been in prison, but I know those who have. I have visited many of them. For those in prison, letter writing is a big part of their contact with the outside world. Down through the years, some have written from prison and their letters have worked to change the world.

Deitrick Bonhoeffer wrote from prison while incarcerated by the Nazis during World War II. Following his death right before the end of the war many of those letters were compiled to form the book, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. That book acquainted thousands with Bonhoeffer's challenging ideas about the faith.

Nelson Mandela wrote hundreds of letters during his twenty-seven years in prison. Many of those were to his family, others to those in authority demanding change and an end to apartheid.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and has since challenged us that *"justice delayed is justice denied."*

The Apostle Paul also wrote from prison. He did some of his best work from prison, or maybe I should say God did some of his best work while Paul was in prison.

You remember that Paul and Silas were in the Philippian jail singing and praising God when an earthquake set them free. The jailer looking after them was so distressed that he was ready to take his own life. Paul and Silas stepped in, and the man famously asked what he must do to be saved. He and his family were baptized that day.

Paul was not so much constrained by prison. He made the best of it and was resolved to continue to reach out. He did that mostly through writing letters. The portion of scripture we read today from Philippians 1:19-21 was written from prison, most likely, in Rome.

Philippians is essentially a thank you note where Paul also shares his deep devotion to Christ. Paul's every reason for being, his identity if you will, was in Christ. Whether in life or death, it was Paul's every desire to bring glory to Jesus.

"I eagerly expect and hope," he says, "that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:20-21)

I have never preached on this great passage, although I have quoted it often, particularly at funerals. It is the sort of stance that reflects a life that is resolutely centered in Jesus.

Meaning and Purpose

Christ was Paul's ultimate passion. As we said earlier, for Paul, Christ was his reason for being. Christ lent meaning and purpose to his life like he had never experienced before.

Regrettably, so many float through life without a lot of meaning and purpose. Theirs is more akin to simply existing, and in some cases, just surviving.

Meaning and purpose has a way of changing the way we live, particularly when it comes to the sort of meaning and purpose Christ lends to life. Life in Christ is rich and full. It informs not just this life, but the next.

Jesus states in John 10:10, *"I have come that you might live and have it abundantly."*

He also states in John 14:1-3, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you."*

I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

I call that "Abundant life now and eternal life later on."

If you want to just skate through life, don't waste your time with Jesus. If, though, you want a fullness to life that stretches all the way to eternity, give your life to Jesus. You will never be sorry.

I can't begin to imagine going through life without Christ. Jesus has fulfilled my life to no end.

- His love has supported me.
- His guidance has never failed me.
- His peace has sustained me.
- His call to serve has opened the door to all sorts of wonderful opportunities.

It has been a full life indeed, and just think: it has only begun, given the light of eternity.

Life and Death

When it came to life and death, Paul was well-settled about such things because he knew Jesus was at the center of both. Paul rejoiced over the fact that he was able to share life with Christ in the here and now. He also rejoiced that he would be able to do that for all eternity. Whether life or death, heaven, or earth, in Christ it was a win/win proposition either way because of Christ.

"For me to live is Christ to die is gain."

What a way to live!

Writing from Rome, and sensing that the end was near Paul kept his eyes upon the horizon, just as he had consistently done since meeting Christ. For him, the horizon is where heaven and earth met, and at that intersection was the empty tomb, the very thing that had ever so briefly imprisoned Christ. For Paul, Christ's resurrection represented freedom for this life and the next, even though a good deal of his life was spent in prison.

For those who keep their lives centered in Christ, Easter is not just on Easter Sunday. It is a whole life issue that inform life all the way to eternity. We need to be reminded of that.

“For me to live is Christ to die is gained” is tied to that.

The power of the resurrection allows us to live triumphantly whether in this life or the next.

Imprisoned

So, what is it that imprisons you?

- Maybe it is the wrong of your life that has a hold of you?
- Maybe it's the cares and concerns that weigh you down all too often?
- Maybe it's the lack of direction your life seems to have?
- Or maybe it's that hollow feeling that leaves you wondering if this is all there is?

Christ wants to set you free. Christ himself says in John 8:36, *“So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed”*

Scott Bartelt, who is now the Director of Prodigal Ministries, a ministry focused on supporting those who have been released from prison, tells the story of the founder and first Director of Prodigal Ministries. The fellow's name is Chuck Broadus.

Early in his life, Chuck was wrongly accused of a murder he didn't do and spent multiple years in jail. Later, Chuck was released when the person who committed the crime confessed.

While Chuck was in prison, he gave his life to Christ. He also noticed that those released from prison would often return in pretty short order. He wondered about a way to help those released from prison to acclimate to life outside of prison and get on with their lives. Upon getting out himself, Chuck, along with the help of a couple of other guys, started Prodigal Ministries. The ministry has helped countless numbers of people not only find the Lord but make a fresh start.

Years ago, I worked on a what is called a Residents Encounter Christ weekend. REC is a prison ministry of the Walk to Emmaus. I noticed during that weekend the deep hunger the residents had for Christ. There was a willingness to get things right with Jesus.

Many gave their lives to him, and while they might not have been released from their actual incarceration, they were freed from what bound them. New meaning and purpose came flooding in. Life or death wasn't so daunting. They became new creations in Christ, all on account of the freedom Christ, and he alone, offered.

That's what happens when Christ becomes the center of a person's life.

How's that sort of thing playing out for you?