**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa**

**Philippians 1:21-30**

**Rev. Dr. Jennifer L. Lazzuri**

**September 20, 2020**

**Worthy of the Gospel**

I love to read. I have been an avid reader since I was a small girl, often bringing a book to the dinner table and holding the edge down with my dinner plate. My mother would sometimes rebuke me and I would have to shut my book until dinner was over when I could retreat to my room after dishes to finish my reading. In fourth grade, one of my stellar achievements was reading through ***Gone With The Wind*** in 4 nights, I could not put it down, and literally read straight through the night for 2-3 nights in a row.

I have found myself in later years sharing quotes with friends and I have a friend who regularly asks me what I am reading. While I try to sum up the book and often share particular quotes with her, it is hard sometimes to capture the fullness of the book and how good it really is, because the quote taken out of context is just that, a quote. You can miss the overall thrust of the book.

Today’s Epistolary reading is from the “book” of Philippians. Philippians is a letter really, a letter of friendship that is written to the church of Philippi from Paul and Timothy. Paul is in prison. We don’t know where, many speculate Rome, -in verse 13 he speaks of the imperial guards which most take to refer to as Roman, as the church at Philippi were colonized subjects under the Roman Empire. The letter is written primarily for two overarching reasons, 1. To thank the members of the church for their support of him and 2. to encourage them to remain united in Christ.

There is a great deal of godly wisdom in Revised Common Lectionary’s editors’ selection of the texts that we use each week in our lectionary. If you follow it, you will be exposed to the full counsel of God, but one of the flaws would be where to begin and end particular readings. This particular reading is one that many would say is difficult to pick up in v. 21 without being exposed to v. 1-20.

Paul begins his letter by stating in v. 3., which is not included in our reading today, ***“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ”***

 The next four weeks begins a series in the Revised Common Lectionary where the book of Philippians is taught. It is one of the rare times this happens and so for the next four weeks we will be looking at Philippians together.

In light of where we are as a nation, and a church, I want to be mindful of bringing to the forefront of your minds verse 3. Paul is reminding the church that he is confident that the one who began a good work in them, Christ, will bring it to completion. We all have times in our lives where we are discouraged, cast down. We can lose sight as we get caught up in the tangled weeds of our daily lives of the bigger picture, that Christ will bring to completion the good work that has been started in us.

As I begin my work here as your new priest, I have asked Linda to help draw up for me a timeline of the history of the church which she so graciously has. Anna Lou, Patty Driskill, many others have begun to share stories with me of the history of the Parish - and I am reading a delightful book that was prepared by two of our own historians for your 150 year anniversary. From its beginning in 1881 as a mission parish to today - our history matters as a church.

As we delve into the book of Philippians for the next four weeks - I want to encourage you to remember Paul’s words as he wrote from prison and his words of encouragement to the church - “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.” It is not dependent on us and any short comings we may have - it is dependent on Christ. Let us as a congregation remember the Good works that were begun before us, and bring them to completion.

Verse 12 in Chapter 1, (which is also not included in our reading today), is important to keep in the forefront of our minds also as we begin, Paul says, “I want you to know beloved that what has happened to me has actually happened to spread the gospel.” To Paul, this suffering and imprisonment was not viewed as a punishment or God turning away from him as we can sometimes view the bad or difficult things that happen to us, but rather he viewed his suffering/imprisonment as a means to spread the gospel. What would it look like for us to turn our thinking in this direction when bad or difficult things happen to us?

Our lesson for today begins by Paul stating that living is Christ and dying is gain.

We can get caught up in what this exactly means, but most Biblical scholars agree that it is the idea of Paul recognizing and celebrating how his life is intertwined with Christ.

He may also be comforting the church, should he die as a result of his imprisonment, he may be preparing them for what could possibly come, both in his life and in theirs.

The city of Philippi is a Roman colony. They share the experience of living under the rule of the Roman Empire. Life at the margin of the empire is truly [“**a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death,”**](https://www.amazon.com/Dying-Colonialism-Frantz-Fanon/dp/0802150276) as Frantz Fanon puts it.1  It is like living at the edge of death, right at the threshold of life and death.

Surprisingly, however, Paul insists quite strongly in this letter that death is a net gain. “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain,” he writes (1:21). It is gain because he can be with Christ (1:23), which is “far better” than living. He seems to know that these people in Philippi are undergoing the same suffering (1:30).

Paul describes what the Philippians are experiencing as “to suffer ***for*** Christ” (1:29). The suffering that the Philippians were experiencing seems to have a Christological significance to it.

The Greek expression here, *to hyper autou paschein* can be translated as “to suffer *on behalf of* Christ.” If this is the Greek expression, then what Paul is saying here, is that they are representing Christ in their suffering. To participate in the sufferings of the Philippians, therefore, means to take part in the body of Christ.

Paul reminds the Philippians that as followers of Christ, they have to be a citizen of Philippi worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27). It is interesting to note that he brought up their citizenship. The imperative *politeuesthe* in 1:27, “live your life” (NRSV), is a political term. It refers to the way one would live or conduct oneself as a citizen in a political community (a *polis*).

This is an interesting passage for today. You miss it in English and in our translation, but this imperative to “live our life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, is a political term. Paul recognizes that the Philippians are living colonized and are subjects to the Roman Empire, life is hard for them. He is exhorting them that as they are citizens and in their actions - as they participate in the Empire, that their actions reflect who they are.

Whatever else this loaded phrase, ***“manner worthy of the gospel”*** means, it is at least calling for their behavior to be consistent with the status of being called by God to be His children.

It is at least to see those who we disagree with, as those whom God creates in God’s image and passionately loves. It is at least to find ways to work together with even those whom we disagree for God’s glory and our neighbors’ well-being. It is to seek to imitate Christ in how we interact with others, giving ourselves to the last and the least.

As we move forward for the next month and half or so, living in a divided nation, which is not the first time in our American history this has happened, let us as a people of St. James be conscious of how we act and represent ourselves to others. Let us conduct our lives in manner worthy of the Gospel.

Let us love one another. Amen.

1. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 128.