

September 20, 2020 — A Word for Today: Live  
Philippians 1:21-30 (Series)

In 30 years of ministry, I have presided over a wide array of funerals. I have presided over funerals for the very young, and I have presided over funerals for the very old. I presided over the funeral of a man who lived to be 105. We gathered and nodded knowingly, that this was a life well lived. Most recently, I presided over the funeral of Karl Kendrick, and I saw a family that had been shaped by his profound love. I remember sitting with a family in the funeral home after the death of their mother. It was two daughters and a son-in-law. I had never met the family and knew nothing about the woman. The funeral director had called me because they did not have a church home, but wanted a Christian funeral. So, after we had exchanged the proper pleasantries and I had gathered the information about which scriptures to read and what prayers to say, I asked about the woman who had died so I might have some things related to her life to say in my message. "Well," said the one daughter, sitting next to her husband, "she lived in Grindstone all her life; worked at the electric plant for 30 years, she retired and took up bowling. She was active in the Grange club." That was it. That was all that was said, so I tried again. "Tell me about your mother." "Well, said the daughter again, "she lived in Grindstone all her life; worked at the electric plant for 30 years, she retired and took up bowling. She was

active in the Grange club." Still uncertain how I was going to turn that into some kind of eulogy and message, I tried a third time.

Just as the woman started the litany again, her husband said, "I think he wants to know what kind of woman your mother was." Instantly the reply came, "I understood what the question was." All of which gives evidence to our familiarity with the patterns of death and dying. Henry Scott Holland once wrote of looking down up the quiet face of one who has been very near and dear to us and imagining the word this loved one would speak: "Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I and you are you, and the old life we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged." There is this sense that we simply live our lives here and then we slide into eternity, unchanged, and everything is wonderful. The thing is, that isn't the world of the Bible. In the first century, death was a problem; death was an ever present danger to be negotiated, and understanding death gave meaning to life.

As you saw in the Friday greetings, Pastor Michael and I are starting a series this week, looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians. Every summer, as we move through these days of ordinary time, the lectionary gives us one or two opportunities to read through a complete epistle. We may not

read every word, but we read through the basic structure of it. We hear the word that the early church spoke to itself as it wrestled with the meaning of this gospel they had come to believe. I think it is worth taking the time to think about the intricate arguments that Paul offers to the early church so that we can be shaped by the words he has left for us. So that we can hear in his ancient words a word that fits this day, a word for today as I have titled this series.

Now, before I get to the word that I believe Paul would give us today, I want to share a bit about the letter itself. Scholars are not united in their sense of when Paul wrote this letter, where he was when he wrote it, or even what that situation was that occasioned the letter. The theory that makes the most sense to me is that while Paul was imprisoned, a group of preachers began to suggest that his imprisonment itself was evidence that Paul wasn't favored of God. You see, there is a tendency among people of faith to assume that if we are faithful, if we do the right thing, good things have to come to us, and if bad things are coming our way, well, that means that likely we are not being faithful. It's not a new idea and it most assuredly is not an idea that has left the community. We tend to call this the Prosperity Gospel these days, but it is an old, old idea.

Kate Bowler describes such a faith by saying that it makes life inherently just and fair. “As it is told, God established a set of principles that keep the world in order . . . [These principles and adherence to them] offers an elegant solution to the problem of unfairness. They create a Newtonian universe in which the chaos of the world seems reducible to simple cause and effect. The stories of people’s lives can be plotted by whether they follow the rules [or don’t]. In this [kind of] world, there is no such thing as undeserved pain. there is no word for tragedy.” Everything is neat and tidy, all as it should be. If I keep my nose clean, if I follow all the rules, if I remain a good boy, then life is required to give me good things, after all only bad people suffer the bad things of life.

In that reckoning of the universe, the idea that a word from a man imprisoned and awaiting trial might be the word we need is absurd. The idea of dying being gain would be anathema, because death itself is a problem, and yet here we are. We who have developed an uneasy alliance with this idea of death as a doorway into perfection have lost sight of the surprise that would have gripped the Philippians and we miss the word that should take us deeper into the life we live. I want to suggest to you today that one of the fundamental truths we need to hear in the writing of Paul is this no-

tion that faithfulness is its own reward, and it has nothing to do with your comfort or your preference.

I heard a preacher say one time “there is a myth that the safest place in the universe is the center of God’s will.” Try telling that to Jeremiah. Try telling that to the other prophets. Try telling that to Peter. Try telling that to Paul. Try telling that to the disciples who were killed for their faithfulness. Try telling that to Jesus Christ. Paul would tell us to dropped this idea of faith bringing peace, joy, and happiness in every moment. Instead, measure faithfulness by the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want you to understand that the word of scripture runs against the wisdom of this world and with the grain of the universe.

Paul wants us to understand that we believe in a different way of thinking and being. Says Paul, “only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” His declaration is absolute. Only. The one and only thing that matters, the singular reality against which everything should be measured, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. “To say ‘living is Christ’ is to say that for [Paul] ‘life *means* Christ.’ Lifts filled up with, occupied with Christ, in the sense that everything Paul does — trusts, loves, hopes, obeys, preaches, follows and so on — is inspired by and done for Christ.”

His point is not so much that we need to live in a way that will gain the gospel, not that we need to earn this gospel, but rather, we need to live

from this gospel, including the idea that dying could be a good thing, you see, this gospel is ground in the idea of a man who went to death on a cross. Ours is not a gospel of pie-in-the-sky optimism promising roses and soft beds. Ours is a gospel that includes the reality of life, in every setting and in every way.

The task of the Christian life is to live your life in a way that you are a person with whom you are willing to spend eternity. The task of the Christian life is to be so filled up with the gospel that it spills from your life. To be so ground in the idea of the kingdom of God that you bring it to this world. NT Wright says, “love is the present virtue in which believers anticipate, and practice the life of the ultimate age to come.” That’s what Paul is getting at in this idea of living is Christ and dying is gain. He is calling us all to live here and now, fully, and completely in light of the Kingdom of God.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is a favorite author of mine, and something of a friend. He lives in Durham, NC and when I was there I got the chance to spend time with him and talk with him. He has given himself to a community of need in Durham, Wall-town as it is known. He lives there not because he has to, but rather so that he might live into the gospel he knows. He has bound himself to the people and to the situation. He is fully present, even as it asks much of him. In one of his books, he uses a beauti-

ful phrase to describe his commitment. He says, “if we want our very being to rise up into God’s being, nothing is more important than rooting ourselves in a place where God can happen.”

“Sometimes our eyes are so focused on the sky, waiting for [heaven] that we miss in our present life the opportunities for the abundant life to which Christ calls us. We know that tomorrow holds promises of hope and joy. Our God though, is also in our present, challenging us to look at life and its circumstances through the lens of hope.” We are called to live in light of the heaven we know to be real and valuable, not just for ourselves but for the whole world. I believe very strongly that the word we need to hear is in this idea of “rooting ourselves in a place where God can happen.” I believe that the Gospel would have us be fully invested in the world of this moment, embodying the very truths of the Kingdom of God. I believe that our call is to live, to live deeply and fully from Jesus Christ in every single moment. I believe the word that Paul would speak to us today is just that: live. Live fully. Live deeply. Live the gospel in every moment. Amen.