

Beyond the Self
Philippians 1:21 – 30
Sunday, September 20, 2020

The movie *A Hidden Life* tells the true story of Franz Jägerstätter, a farmer and devout Christian who lived in Austria in the 1930s. He lived with his wife and three daughters outside a rural village where they spent their days working and playing in the fields, dancing, laughing, caring for their local church, and sharing a quiet, happy life together with the others in their village. But in 1940, after German troops invaded Austria, Franz was conscripted into the German army to fight for the Nazis. While a lot of the men around him were quietly resigned to having to do this, Franz really struggled with it. He knew that Hitler was an evil man, and as a Christian he wrestled with the morality of war. So he got several deferments as a farmer, but in 1943 he was called to active duty.

There is a series of scenes in this movie where he is *struggling* with what to do. He knows that if he goes and fights, there is a *chance* that he will get to come back and be with his family again. But he also knows that if he does that, he will be supporting a cause that he feels is unjust and evil. If he *resists* and refuses to fight, he will be thrown in prison and likely killed, leaving his wife and daughters alone. He *wants* to be with his family and continue living life together. But, ultimately, he doesn't do what *he wants*. He does what he thinks is *necessary*.

I was thinking about that as I read Paul's letter to the Philippians this week. Because Paul faced a similar situation. A little background on this letter. Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Philippi, somewhere around the year 60 A.D. when he was imprisoned by the Roman Empire, awaiting trial and eventual execution. Philippi was a very important city in the Roman Empire, and it was referred to as a "little Rome." The people who lived there, even though they were Greek, had been declared official Roman citizens, which carried with it a lot of

privileges. And the Philippians took a lot of pride in their Roman status. To put it in our terms, it was a very *patriotic* city.

Because of that, the Christians in Philippi had a very difficult time. As Paul stresses throughout his other letters, they are not citizens of the Roman Empire, the kingdom of *man*. They are citizens of the Kingdom of *God*. They did not pledge allegiance to *Caesar* but to *Christ*. The Romans professed that *Caesar* is Lord, while Christians professed that *Jesus* is Lord. That would have met with a lot of *resistance* from the citizens of Philippi. They would have said, “Hey, we’re *proud* to be a part of the Roman Empire! *You* should be proud to be a part of the Roman Empire. We’ve got a great thing going here, and if you keep talking like that, you’re going to mess it up for all of us! You’re not doing your duty as a citizen!” That’s important, and we’re going to come back to that a little later.

But that’s essentially why Paul was in prison in the first place. He’d been going around proclaiming the Kingdom of *God* and saying that Jesus is Lord. So he has met with resistance from the Roman Empire, and he has been arrested and imprisoned. He is writing this letter to the church in Philippi while under house arrest, so he had a *little* bit more freedom than someone who was chained up in a prison. But Paul shares with the Philippians the struggle he is facing. He knows that this is all probably going to end up with him being executed. And he’s okay with that, because it means he will get to go be with Jesus. At the same time, though, he *founded* this church in Philippi. These people are Christians, in large part, because of *him*. He feels a tremendous *responsibility* for them. And *they* have been taking care of *him* while he’s in prison. He *loves* them. And he doesn’t want to *leave* them. He wants to go back to Philippi and *see* them again.

So he says to them, “I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two. My *desire* is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary for *you*.” Because if he *lives* he can keep working with them and nurturing their faith. I remember years ago I knew this man whose wife had been dead for about a decade. And he missed her *so much*. Every time he talked about her, he would get teary-eyed. He would say, “I just want to see her again. I can’t wait to see her again.” He was ready to go so that he could be together with his wife in heaven. But at the same time, he would talk about his grandkids. He would say, “I really want to watch them grow up. I love them *so much*, and I don’t want to leave them.” He was torn between the two. It’s the same kind of situation that Paul faced. And what my friend said was, “I’m going to live as long as I can for *them*. And when my time comes, I’m ready.”

Paul ends up saying, “I really want to go be with Christ, but I know that you *need* me. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith.” He doesn’t choose what *he* wants. He chooses what *they need*. And, you know, to a certain degree, he didn’t have any control over that. He was a prisoner awaiting trial and execution. He could “choose” to remain in the flesh all he wants, but when Rome chose for him *not* to, that was it. But what he’s saying here is, “I’m going to keep fighting and keep trying. I’m not just going to give up and let them kill me. I’m going to fight for *you*. I’m going to live as long as I can for you, and when my time comes, I’m ready.”

What he *wanted* and what was *necessary* were two different things. And he chose what was *necessary*.

Remember the quote that I've shared with you the past few weeks that is guiding our look at Paul's letters to the Romans and Philippians. It's by a theologian named Israel Kamudzandu, who says, "The main challenge of our time is to live with a transformed mind, a mind that is open to the other and leads to inner transformation. It is crucial for Christians to consider each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life, and to live each day beyond the self." The Philippians were Paul's loving partners on the journey of life. And by choosing what *they needed* rather than what *he wanted*, he was living each day beyond the self.

We are all faced with difficult choices like this, between what *we want* and what *others need*. We're all living through one right now. Not a single one of us *wants* to quarantine and wear masks all the time and practice physical distancing. That is not how any of us envisioned this year unfolding. But it's what is necessary right now, it's what we need of each other, in order to keep one another healthy and safe. And so we have to choose each day to live beyond the self, to live beyond simply what *I want*, taking *your* life and *your* needs into consideration.

I came home from work the other day, and I was exhausted, and I had a headache. All I wanted to do was sit down and relax for a moment. But as soon as I opened the door, one of our kids came into the room bouncing off the walls like a pinball saying, "Dad! Dad! Will you go out in the yard and play football with me?!" And I'll be honest with you, I *really* didn't want to do that at that moment. But I knew that if I *didn't*, first, he would be really disappointed, and second, he'd just go sit in front of a screen until dinner. I knew that what was more necessary for him was for me to go outside and play. So I lived beyond the self and went out with him. We had so much fun, and by the time we came back in, I felt *great*.

When we love another person, it means living beyond what *I* want and taking *your* life and *your* needs into consideration. And we are called to love *everyone*; to consider *each human being* as a loving partner on the journey of life; not just the ones who are *easy* to love, but also the ones who, loving them takes a little more effort on our part. We are called to weigh *their needs* against *our desires*.

Now, the very next thing that Paul says to the Philippians is, “Live your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I am with you or not, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.” When he says, “live your lives,” there is something we lose there in the translation from Greek. The word he uses is *politeuesthe*, and it is a *political* term. It doesn’t just mean “live your life.” It was a term that was specifically used to refer to *civic duty*. It means something closer to, “practice your citizenry, conduct yourself as a citizen.” So he’s saying, “Practice your citizenry in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” And the word for *gospel* is the Greek word *evangelion*, which literally means, “good news,” and in the Roman Empire was associated with the Roman emperor, *Caesar*. When Caesar sent a report throughout the empire about a military, political, or social victory, it was referred to as *evangelion*, the good tiding or good news of Caesar. It was a term that the Christians *co-opted* as a way of saying, “*Caesar* does not have good news. *Christ* has good news.”

Remember, Paul is saying this to *Philippians*, who were citizens of *Rome*. He’s not saying, “Practice your citizenry in a manner worthy of the good news of Caesar.” He’s saying, “Practice your citizenry, conduct yourself as a citizen in a manner worthy of the good news of Jesus Christ.” He is saying to them, “Your citizenry is not with Rome. It’s with Christ. So in your public life, you are to live in a way that reflects the good news of Christ.” This was a politically

charged message that could get Paul and the Philippians in a lot of trouble. And Paul knows that. I mean, he's in prison for that very reason. And he says to them, "You're going to have to suffer like *I* am suffering." But Paul *embraces* his suffering. He doesn't seek it out, but he embraces it when it comes because he says it helps him identify with Christ in *his* suffering. And *Christ*, in *his* life, stood with those who were suffering – lepers, drunkards, prostitutes, the outcast, outsiders, those whom no one else thought were good enough, Christ suffered *with* them and *for* them.

What Paul is calling the Philippians to here is to live beyond the self by standing in solidarity with those who suffer, so that they might bear witness to the world of the life of Christ. And the calling to us is no different. As individuals and as the church, we are to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdom of man, standing in solidarity with those who suffer, so that we might bear witness to the world of the good news of Jesus Christ. We don't just live by what *we want*. We live, mindful of what *others need*. And we give ourselves to that, even if it means we suffer in the process. That is *not* the way of the world, which tells us to follow your dreams, look out for yourself, and do what makes you happy. But it is the way of Christ. And, ultimately, it will be a sign to the world of our salvation.

Who is it that is suffering among us? Who is in need? *That* is who we are called to stand with and give our lives to, as Christ did with us. To live *beyond* the self by loving them *as* ourselves.