

## Pentecost XVII

### Philippians 1:21-30

<sup>21</sup>For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; <sup>24</sup>but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. <sup>25</sup>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, <sup>26</sup>so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

<sup>27</sup>Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup>and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. <sup>29</sup>For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— <sup>30</sup>since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

“For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.” In the name...

Perhaps it's his age. Perhaps it's his beatings. Perhaps it's both. For a person to find the Christ of Heaven to finally be preferential to the weariness of this world is its own miracle to me. For those of us living in a nation willing to spend 40% of its Medicare dollars on the last month of life (which is neither surprising, nor a criticism—though it seems to indicate that we want to live!!!), it's no small miracle to read a man who at least begins to wonder. I realize this is more Nate's musings than it is biblical exposition; but either way, Paul is clear on one thing: the Christian, here, has no real dilemma. To live? Christ. To die? Gain. One may be shadows and the other clear sight, but either way you are in Christ.

But I'm still not sure that such an emboldening reflection fully explains Paul's comment that suffering for Christ is a privilege. That seems to be the most interesting part of this passage, since it's not intuitive. In what way is a life-threatening existence, because of one's religious affiliation, a privilege? Whatever world that is, it seems distant from the world of Tylenol, deadbolts, and alarm systems. It's other worldly, says Nate as he turns the ignition; Nate, whose car has more airbags than it does tires.

Paul builds to this comment in at least three ways:

1. Paul sticking around is good for the church, even though his heart is already oriented toward heaven. But his sticking around inevitably involves suffering. This seems to

indicate that the suffering of a member serves to encourage the saints. In fact, he says it's for their 'joy and progress.'

2. Paul then says to live a life 'worthy of the Gospel,' and then uses an almost militaristic encouragement: 'in no way intimidated by your opponents.' Standing firm in the spirit has some grit when it comes to standing over and against injustice and an assault on the Good.
3. This lively engagement with embodied encouragement matched with a lack of intimidation, Paul says, demonstrates the destruction of our opponents, and evidence of your salvation. This is also not intuitive to therapeutic cultures like ours. We are told to look inside when doubts of any kind come. Paul says to look without. Are you suffering? Are you standing strong against opponents of the Gospel of grace? Then salvation has come! We don't look as much within—we look without.

There's your backdrop to such a claim, friends. Paul then invokes God as having done ALL OF IT, and names it a privilege.

At the very least, we know this to be true: that we cannot produce life in others without the wear and tear of our own being. But one could allow that kind of wear and tear with sinful reluctance—with teeth-clenching resolve—that doesn't smell like privilege. That's the leap for me. It's the leap for Christianity.

And it's no different than the paradox of incarnation. If God became a man, then things are not as they seem. What should've looked like gate-storming justice, instead looks like love. What should've looked like investiture of power, instead looks like the face of one who identifies with pain. What should've looked like redemption, first looks like the fragile life of an infant.

And so when Isaiah says that it was through his stripes that we are healed, and when Paul says that a full participation with those sufferings is a privilege, we who claim that universal joy and the overturning of sin came through a baby who was later killed as a homeless rabbi, just wink across the aisle, knowing that the joke is on the world.

The rest is Holy Spirit. Beginning to end. I don't pretend for a second that anything I just said is easy. Deliverance from what is fragile in every way? Suffering a privilege? I entrust you to the Spirit of God, dear friends. I entrust you to the Word of God. I entrust you to the holy Sacrament. I entrust you to one another. The world will never smile upon your suffering with the same tender affection as the one who suffered for your deliverance. I'd recommend looking to Him. The world will tell you to get over it and conform. Jesus, instead, will call you conqueror. Grow close to those who suffer, friends, so that you can stand tall in the day of opposition. It's in these moments, friends, that Jesus will appear so profoundly human to you. And it's in these moments, friends, that Jesus will appear so other-worldly as the God that he is.

Now to the gospel for 2 seconds. The first laborer hired was convinced that the last hired hadn't suffered enough in the heat of the day to receive the same wage. This maps perfectly onto Paul. Will we resent those around us who've had an easier go at this? Do we really want

all peoples to be saved? Or just those who've had the same dose of life that we have had and appreciate it a bit more? Judge not. Let the latecomer glutton inherit the whole thing. Let the abusive employer who finds eternal life in the last hours inherit the whole thing. Let the apathetic blow-hard who calls upon the name of Jesus inherit the whole thing. Judge not.

At this altar we are crushed by a cross, and enlarged by an empty tomb. His body—food indeed. His blood—drink indeed. We toast the fruits of his suffering, knowing that the bitter vinegar of this life becomes the sweetness of the vine.