

A Fragrant Offering

Our passage from Philippians this morning is what some might term “a problem passage.” You might not think this to be the case; after all, it contains two oft-quoted verses: verse 13 (“I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me”) and the first half of verse 19 (“my God shall supply all your need”). Somewhere in the dim recesses of my memory, there’s even a chorus of “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.” Nevertheless, this passage appears only in the Roman Catholic version of the lectionary, that three-year cyclical tour of essential passages in the Scriptures, and even there only five of the eleven verses are “cherry-picked” for presentation. The problems seem to be twofold. On the one hand, the passage is clearly about giving to the church, or at least to missionaries – a delicate topic at the best of times. On the other hand, Paul seems to be trying to dissuade the Philippians from sending him anything else and what preacher wants to bring *that* message to a church? But as usual, fools rush in where wise men fear to tread, so I decided to wrap up our series on Philippians with this passage and to include all of it. I’ll just have to rely on your affection for my wife and children not to cut my salary as a result.

Scholars as well as preachers have issues with this passage. To many of them, it seems tacked on, not an organic part of the whole. This has led to speculation that these verses are actually from another letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians; indeed, some scholars have speculated that what we have as the Book of Philippians is actually an *assemblage*, a sort of literary collage, made up of bits and pieces of letters that Paul wrote to his friends over the years. I disagree; I find a very coherent message and spirit in this letter and this peculiar conclusion, it seems to me, not only fits in well with the overarching theme of the letter, living a Christ-like life, but also serves as a delightfully crafted conclusion that brings the careful reader full circle to the very beginning of the letter: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.” Paul ends as he began and this careful repetition of message and theme leads me to believe that there is something important for us to learn here about how we are to follow the Christians in Philippi as they followed Paul in the way of Christ Jesus.

So, let’s return for just a moment to those first verses in the book and pick up a thread I want to follow to its ending here. Paul says in 1:5 that the Philippians have “shar(ed) in the gospel from the first day until now.” Clearly, they must have understood Paul’s teaching about Jesus as Good News from the very beginning and immediately opened their hearts to both message and messenger. Their close bond with Paul goes beyond that, however. In 4:16, Paul tells what happened when he left Philippi: “For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.” Now, we know from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians (2:9), that he did not ask the new believers in Thessalonica to support him while he was there but we can also read in Acts 17 that there was great opposition against Paul from the Jewish community in Thessalonica. It’s likely that Paul was unable to support himself there, as he did in other towns, by his work as a tent-maker. Had it not been for the gifts of his friends in Philippi, then, the mission in Thessalonica would have failed instead of leaving a thriving young church to which the apostle later wrote two letters.

The support of the Philippians for Paul’s ministry did not end there. As he traveled further away from them, they continued to send gifts. “When I left Macedonia,” Paul writes, “no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone.” It’s not clear if the

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church at Philippi sent funds to Paul when he was in Athens but Acts 18 records that Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia to join Paul in Corinth and they must have brought gifts from the Philippians with them. Later, Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about how his ministry among them had been made possible (II Cor. 8:1-4): “We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints...”

We can't know when or why the gifts from the Philippians to Paul stopped. Mindful of their poverty, he may have asked them to send nothing more or it may be that they lost track of him on his travels. Based on what he writes in this passage, their concern for him never stopped: “I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.” But now they have heard he is in prison and their gifts to him have resumed. “I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent,” Paul writes. Epaphroditus himself is worth our attention. His story is at the end of chapter two in Philippians, beginning in verse 25: “I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.” We see in Epaphroditus the attitude of the Christians in Philippi in a nutshell – so sold out to faith in Christ and a desire to help in Paul's ministry that he worked himself sick, risking his life just as his fellows in Philippi had given generously to the ministry even out of their poverty.

I think it tells us something about Paul, too, that he's not willing for this brother to put himself at further risk. He sends Epaphroditus home, not because he's failed in his mission from Philippi, but because he has given more than should be expected. Paul shows concern for his friends back in Philippi in a similar way. Again, I think he's concerned about them over-extending themselves on his behalf. “Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have... Not that I seek the gift... I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied...” Some see here a sort of insincere “Aw, shucks, you shouldn't have;” a coy first century precursor to the Jewish Mother version of the light bulb joke. Do you know that one? “How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? Don't mind me; I'll sit here in the dark.” I don't believe that Paul is engaging in indirect solicitation here. I think he really is politely asking for the gifts to stop – the Philippians can't afford them anyway – as well as offering himself again as an object lesson in the letter's theme: having the same mind which was in Christ Jesus.

“I have learned to be content with whatever I have,” Paul writes. “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret

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of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” It is a near-echo of what he wrote to them earlier: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain... whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” It is Paul’s ongoing attempt to teach the truth that Jesus had taught in this way: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also... do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

But although Paul neither needs nor wants the Philippians gifts for himself, nevertheless he thanks them and he sees a great value in what they have done. “...it was kind of you to share my distress... Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account.” We should remember, when Paul commends the Philippians for their kindness, that this is the same man who told the Galatians that kindness is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and the Corinthians that the love which Christians are to show the world is distinguished in part by kindness. In their kindness to him, Paul sees, as Richard Melick puts it in his commentary on this book, that “their gifts evidenced their willingness to identify with the new era inaugurated by Jesus.” This is the reason for Paul’s true joy in the Philippians; not in the gifts that they sent but in the spirit which those gifts represented. Gerald Hawthorne writes, “The only thing he looked for and sought after was that the Philippians might follow the principle that the generous will be treated generously, and that those who sow bountifully will reap bountifully...” Paul recognizes that as the Philippians act in a Christ-like way, giving to others even at their own expense, so they will come to live fully into the new life which they have received in Christ. By tightening their belts even further to share with him, they have found a truer abundance.

As so often seems to be the case, my leisure reading this past week brought me to a passage with wonderful resonance to these verses and their theme. Listen to these words by Parker Palmer, the Quaker sociologist, educator and activist: “Abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store. Whether the “scarce resource” is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around. Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection, but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them – and receive from others when we are in need... Abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community not only creates abundance – community is abundance.”

“...the gifts you sent (are) a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God,” Paul says to his friends. Again, he is touching on one of the core truths taught by Jesus. By helping Paul in his distress, by sending Epaphroditus to visit and tend to the prisoner, they are fulfilling the role of the good sheep in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25: “Then the righteous will answer him,

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‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” By sending gifts to Paul, they have all along been offering gifts to God, the sort of gifts that God treasures most.

Paul sees a very clear result for this type of self-sacrificial giving: “my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” I want to be very clear about what Paul is promising here because just as his call to the Philippians to have the same mind which was in Christ Jesus also applies to us, so too does the promise attached to the call. First of all, the promise is for the satisfaction of every need, not every desire. We live in a culture that promises, or at least strongly suggests, that if we live in the right way, our every desire will be fulfilled. If we use the right toothpaste, drink the right beer, buy the right car... well, you know the tune by now. If we go to the right schools and work hard and buy the right stocks... yeah, that really worked out, didn't it? What Paul is promising on God's behalf is nothing like the ads and the marketing and the spoken and unspoken assumptions of the American Dream. It is a simple statement that for those who walk in the way of Jesus, the things that are truly needful in life will come. God will satisfy our needs, says Paul, “according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” Richard Melick points out that the phrase is “according to,” not “out of.” “According to,” he writes, “means that the supply is suited to the resource and like it in kind and extent.” In other words, God blesses us in ways that bring glory not to us, but to God, and in the same way that Christ gave God glory. If we walk in the way of Jesus, people will look at us and see Jesus and through Jesus, the Loving Creator of All.

And so, we are back to where we began. Paul thanks God for the Philippians not just because of their kindness to him but because he is confident of God's work in their lives, that they are producing the sort of harvest that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. And, as I said when we began, me and Paul got a lot in common. I thank God for you, Good Shepherd Baptist Church, not only for your kindness to me and mine but because I am confident in God's work in your lives. Like Paul with the Philippians, I urge you to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” I don't expect any of you to have to die for our faith but I do ask you to consider carefully how you live and I expect all of you to do the same for me. To live according to the predominant culture means a life of self-centeredness but to live according to Christ means letting go of what we have in order to find true abundance in our community.

Next week, we will dedicate our pledges of financial support for the ministry of this church in the upcoming year. These pledges are something that we all take seriously and consider prayerfully, I know. When I read Paul's words about the Philippians, it gives me pause: “their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints...” It makes

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me wonder if, in my relative abundance, am I being truly generous? Now, it may be dangerous to say this on the Sunday before Pledge Sunday but I don't think God is keeping score on exactly what percentage I give or on exactly how big our church budget is. I think God cares about what's in my heart when I give – if I'm truly giving what I can or if I'm holding back out of fear or selfishness. I think God cares about what we're doing with our church budget. Are we simply ensuring our own comfort or are we creating a place that is attractive and comfortable enough for others to want to be here and are we then investing in new ways of attracting new people to come and see what we have here? Are we always putting the needs of our little community first or are we making sure that the needs of others are being met? Is it enough to give what's left over to ABC missions four or five times a year, to the hungry once a month? If we've given all we can of our money, are we giving all we can of our time and skills to improve the lives of our neighbors, to educate our children, to reach out to the lonely? Are these questions making you nervous? I hope so; they make me nervous, too.

Because, you see, I'm still figuring it out, what it means to have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus. I haven't gotten to the place where Paul was yet. I've not yet learned to be content with whatever I have. Going hungry and having plenty are not yet the same thing to me. But I'm working on it. And I know, ultimately, that as I grow closer and closer to Jesus, that I will be able to do all these things through Christ who strengthens me. And I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among us will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.