

Claiming the Cause of Christ
Philippians 1: 27-30

Have you every received a gift you didn't want? Perhaps the Philippians would have liked to return the one Paul brought them from God; the chance not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for Him as well. In the face of such an offer, could we really blame the Philippians if they had responded, well, thanks, Paul, really, but no thanks? Let us pray.

Eternal God, healer who comforts us in pain and sorrow, use these words to reveal to us the beauty and wisdom of your way, that we might find strength to follow even when your path is hard. Amen.

One of the main characters in Anne Lamott's book BLUE SHOE is precocious 9-year-old Harry. Harry probably speaks for all of us when he questions the wisdom of embracing all of life, even the hurt. In the scene of the book I am referring to, newly divorced mother Mattie tries to console her son Harry after their loyal dog, Marjorie, has been put to sleep. Harry quickly gets to the heart of the scary question Marjorie's death has introduced into his young consciousness.

"Mom", he sniffles, "did I tell you my friend Dan is planning to die at the same time as his mother?"

"The same time as his mother?" Mattie replies, "probably not, Harry, Dan is a lot younger than his mother, so will probably live a lot longer than she will."

“Longer?!” Harry shrieks, (this is not what he wants to hear), “Does that mean I’ll live longer than you?”

“Probably”, she says, quickly realizing what a mistake it might have been to tell the truth, “but don’t worry Harry, I will live for a long time yet.”

But Mattie’s sugar coating comes too late. Harry is inconsolable. “You mean I will have to live without you Mom?!” he sobs, “If I had known that, if I had known that I would have never consented to be born!”

Harry is not the first to express anger at the reality of suffering and loss in our lives. How, we wonder, can the God we are told loves us, permit what seems at times such unbearable pain? When life takes away our health, our job, the lives of innocents out there in the world, the lives of those we love, we want to cry mercy! Enough! Or, God, where are you? Surely You are not going to leave us alone in the world you created to drown in our own tears?

I imagine that’s the mood the Apostle Paul must respond to as he sits in his prison cell, probably in Rome though we are not sure, to write one of his churches at Philippi, a community in the far northeastern arm of what is modern day Greece. Paul had received a letter from some of the leaders of the church in this town just over the hill from the Aegean Sea who had written him concerned for his safety, fearful for their own, and for the well being of those they loved. You’ve been in Paul’s place. Hurting, terribly vulnerable eyes look up at you, the voice straining to get around the lump blocking the throat.

But Mommy he says, or friend, or sister, or love of my life, I am just so afraid There are a million reasons for the fear Paul and the Philippians faced, and fear we try and stuff down day after day. Visions of all the forms disaster could take gnaw at our hearts even as we try and push thoughts of them away. My friends, questions about God's goodness and power that arise from our fears, especially our fears come true, are not easy ones, for us, or for Paul. But Paul doesn't side step the need of the Philippians to ask the questions, nor does he offer them platitudes that downplay the things that frighten them. Instead, he offers them what he has received from God; a love that is much greater than his own – a love he believes can ultimately save them, even if he himself cannot. For their part, what he asks them to do is “believe” in that love, to live into it, for it is that willingness to trust love, even in its terrible vulnerability, that will be their salvation.

Before we go any further, let me clarify that to believe in the love revealed in the gospel; the love on which Paul staked not only his own life, but also the lives of those he loved, does not mean to recite the Apostle's Creed with your fingers crossed – or even uncrossed. Does trusting someone consist primarily in bold statements, I trust you, I trust you, I trust you, with no corresponding behavior? or is trusting someone, over time, anything less than living out that trust, daring to trust to see if the one you give your trust to is worthy of it? Faith in God is like trust, it IS trust, and it is much more than something merely stated; it is a way of life. We live out love not because our faithfulness is perfect or because our trust is perfect but because the God in whom we trust has proven herself trustworthy as we have lived with her over time.

But in whom do we trust? What is the fundamental nature of this God who would claim our loyalty? Douglass John Hall, a Canadian theologian, asserts that “suffering love” is THE defining characteristic of the God of Israel who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. If Hall’s claim is true, and I believe it is, then it is not domineering world like power that defines the God we worship, ever, regardless of the extent to which we might prefer a divine superhero to a God who is a sacrificial lamb. Instead, the “power” that defines the God of Israel is the power of compassion, the strength to suffer not only with but also for.

What does it mean that God loves us enough to suffer for us and with us? It means that God is not impervious to our cries of pain; that God too looks at the world and sees things that *should not be!* Auschwitz, 9/11, Syrian refugees, any refugees!, climate change, continuing racial injustice, people who work fulltime and who still cannot afford a place to live, senseless gun deaths, drug deaths, coronavirus deaths; all these years theology has made such diligent, head splitting attempts to reconcile a God of love and power to the suffering to which God’s creatures are subject, only to discover that the God of the Christian gospel has absolutely no intention of being reconciled to that which is wrong in the world! What Jesus reveals about that God is that God’s own face is set against those things which negate life – and therefore suffering does not, must not, cannot ever have the last word in God’s world.

It is only under the shelter of this loving, suffering God’s wings that we can stop being afraid of the suffering that will come our way long enough to live fully, which means, at least in part, to find the courage to live like we really

believe that all human suffering, including our own suffering and that of those we love, is subject, like all else, to the love of the God who will never let any of us go. Frederick Buechner, a 20th century pastor and theologian tells the story in his novel the Lion Country of Antonio, who sits at the bedside of his twin sister as she dies of bone cancer. Antonio talks about his fight to live that fully even though his heart was breaking saying, “When Miriam’s bones were breaking If I could have pushed a button that would have stopped not her pain but the pain of her in me, I would not have done so. I would not have because, to put it quite simply, my pain was because I loved her, and to wish my pain away would have been somehow to wish away my love for her as well.” Antonio continues that at his best and bravest he does not want to escape the future without Miriam, even though he knows that it will contain the pain of being without her, and someday his own great and final pain. This he says because “a distaste for dying is twin to a taste for living” and he does not want to tamper with the one for fear of damaging the other.¹

Paul calls us to our best and bravest in his letter to the Philippians, without downplaying what that costs. Living a life worthy of the gospel means in a nutshell I believe being willing to suffer for love’s sake. And so Paul asks that we align ourselves with the God of suffering love in order to find our way to the abundant life Christ would give us, a life filled with both love and pain, a life full of eternal meaning. Clinging to the way of love even when that way seems way too hard serves the cause of Christ, which is the cause of Life itself. Suffering, with this understanding of it, constitutes nothing less than the birth pangs of the life filled Kingdom of God. Faith in that

¹ As told in Hall, Douglass John. God and Human Suffering.

Kingdom serves its coming. Participation in the building of God's Kingdom is the meaningful purpose to which Paul calls the Philippians, and the cause to which God calls us as well. It is a cause to which He is committed. His cross is proof enough of that. To all of our agonized questions as to why bad things happen to God's people God gives us more than an explanation. God gave, and continues to give us, his very dying, rising self.

In the name of the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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That is what Paul asks of the Philippians. “Live your lives”, he says, “in a manner worthy of the gospel.” That is, trust the God who made you, and came to you in Jesus Christ enough to live out your faith in him no matter how difficult that is. Stand firm in the ethic of love, Paul says, for my sake, and for your own. Do not waver from that way which has been handed down to you from Jesus Christ to me to you, and do not fear your opponents as you hold fast to faith in that path for your lack of fear is proof of your salvation. Proof of salvation?!! How is it helpful to make ourselves as vulnerable in the face of our enemies as lambs on the way to slaughter? Whether we are afraid or not, we are dead. If salvation means anything close to saving ones own life, we will have to forsake Jesus to save ourselves. Christianity 101 teaches that holding fast to the way of the Savior, putting others before ourselves as a principle and not as a convenience, will lead us right to a cross.

Exactly. That’s the point. But there is more to the story. Resurrection is not something that occurs in spite of the cross, in spite of the evil in this world, it comes *through* it. Obviously, then salvation is not about being delivered from evil, at least in the short run. Salvation is about being so close to God already, so engrafted into the Lover’s triangle of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we consent with joy to be used as instruments for the Lover God’s work of redeeming the world. Knowing that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not life, nor death, nor heights nor depth, nor powers, nor principalities, we step out of our fears long enough to grasp in faith the Holy Grail, the cause of Christ in the world.

John Prine, a folk singer from my home state of Kentucky, has a song about an old man that starts out, “there’s a rainbow of babies over the graveyard.” That is the vision that sustains the man who Prine describes as “being in heaven before he died.” Irrepressible life

Douglass John Hall, a Canadian theologian, suggests that it is only suffering love that can do what God intends for the creation, and that is to alter the course of things away from death and toward life. God gave human beings freedom so that we could choose those things that enhance life, those that make for abundant life, those that belong to eternal life. God wants to involve us in God’s own great cause of eternal life lived in love. Love by its nature, must be chosen freely if it is to be love at all, and thus we have been granted the freedom to choose against it, which we often do. When we do we voluntarily put on the shackles of sin and death and fear; chains that deny us the abundant life God wills for us, deny the grace of the life God would grant. We work against the cause of Christ in the world.

Douglass John Hall, a Canadian theologian claims that “suffering love” is THE defining characteristic of the God of Israel who was revealed in Jesus Christ. If Hall’s claim is true, and I believe it is, then it is not love of power that defines the God we worship, ever, regardless of how much we might prefer a divine superhero to the sacrificial lamb, it is instead the power of love. Love can only touch, can only change by effecting a repentance from within, any other show of power destroys the sinner along with the sin, thus working decisively against Christ’s cause of ever more abundant life. No sword can cut away the sin without destroying the sinner.² Thus has God ordered the world, with love being the most potent and therefore most elusive power. How far would you go in pursuit of the truth, especially knowing that being held in and by the truth, being adopted into God’s own being, a being defined by suffering love, is salvation itself?

² Hall, Douglass John. God and Human Suffering, p. 98

- a. what is the manner worthy of the gospel of Christ?
- b. That way I will know that you are striving for the faith of the Gospel Which is what? Why does the faith of the gospel matter – what is it, why do we care?
- c. How do we maintain the “manner” worthy of the gospel? Faith is the opposite of fear. Be not terrified or intimidated by your opponents.
- d. Who are the opponents? What is it that they strive for? Lack of humility, self aggrandizement, why? Out of fear. Fear is the enemy of the faith of the gospel, because through it, we are pulled away from the straight course.
- e. Evidence of your salvation—what is salvation, why are we interested? Salvation is being without fear, undivided, in Christ already, “he was in heaven before he died.” So convinced of God’s love for him, that he could not help but love others as his primary *raison d’etre*.
- f. For God has graced your life with the cause of Christ and it is in that struggle that you will find salvation, eternal life, becoming part of the life giving and affirming center, which is God.

Is the “cause of Christ” a gift? How, in what way.....

Meaning to meaningfulness, isolation into community.

Community with God. Death into Life.

Claim it all, in the name of Life, in the name of God.

Living Eternally in Time: Walking the Way of Christ
Philippians 2: 1-4
Living Eternally in Time: Sharing the Glory of Christ
Philippians 2: 5-11
Living Eternally in Time: Inheriting the Promise of Christ
Philippians 2: 12-16