Sermon Text – Sunday, September 20, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

Reading #1 – Jonah 3:10-4:11; Reading #2 – Matthew 20:1-16
Scripture for the message: Philippians 1:21-30 – Living for Christ

Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi as a friend and as a way to encourage a church that was one of his favorites. This was a congregation with primarily female leadership and a congregation possibly feeling the effects of separation from Paul and hoping for him to return to them soon. Paul writes from prison, whether he is in prison in Rome or in Ephesus is not known but we do know because of that he is unable to come to them in person, so he sends a letter.

It's unclear whether there was a particular situation in the church that Paul needed to address or if the letter was sent because the timing was right and there was someone to deliver it. As was the case with most of the "churches" Paul writes letters to, the church in Philippi was a church in the middle of hostile territory. Philippi was governed by "Italian Law," and its residents were Roman citizens who worshipped Roman and Greek Gods, they were quite possibly hostile to the Jewish residents and those who worshipped Jesus. Paul's letter brings encouragement, grace, and peace.

In this letter, it does seem like Paul is writing to his friends as he talks about his desire to "depart and be with Christ." These are things one would confide about to a friend – after all, Paul was in prison and I can't imagine that would be a very comfortable circumstance. Do not think that Paul is telling them that death is preferrable for all followers of Christ – Paul is not advocating a type of "Heaven's Gate" departure from earth! He is not encouraging martyrdom or self-deprecation. These are personal reflections Paul makes in a letter to friends. The ultimate goal for Paul and those he writes to is to live for Christ.

The encouraging part of Paul's letter comes as he writes "I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith." Paul desires to be with his friends and that would bring encouragement to a congregation that misses his presence. Because of the culture in which they live, Paul encourages his friends to stand firm whether or not he is able to see them again. These must have been difficult words for him to write as much as it was difficult for his friends to hear – difficult to think that they might never see him again.

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Paul writes, "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." What does that look like? He encourages this congregation to stand firm in one spirit. Whether he is with them or not should have no effect on how they live for Christ. The church of Philippi must not rely solely on Paul's presence. That can translate to modern churches as well, whether the "minister" you've become used to and attached to is present or not should have no effect on your worship experiences – stand firm in one spirit.

Strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. I have in my mind a group of worshippers who work together toward the same goal – pooling resources and praying for each other. In ancient first-century times the church would either struggle together or fail. That is also true in modern times – a church cannot survive if those who are members ignore the needs of the full community; we must strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

Paul encourages this congregation in Philippi to not become intimidated by "your opponents." Who are the opponents I wonder? Could their opponents be the same as the opponents of the church today? I don't think Paul considers those who do not know Christ as opponents, they would be welcomed as the ones who need to hear about Christ – not intimidating at all. More likely opponents are the authorities and governmental forces that persecute the followers of Christ. Maybe opponents Paul refers to are those who love the world, who know Christ but choose the world and the things in it. I would consider those opponents to still be around in the current culture.

What Paul writes next is curious – "For them [the opponents] this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation." To understand that I wonder if we must go back to his encouragement to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Paul isn't telling the congregation that how they live their lives is an omen of destruction. "To them [the opponents], Christian conduct will be a sign of what will occur at the end." We know that our salvation is God's doing, and our living for Christ, striving with one mind for the faith of the gospel, is part of how the church illustrates what living in the kingdom looks like. It is as if the church is saying to the opponents of the church – live this way or meet your destruction in the end. That being said though, the way the church lives must be according to what Jesus teaches.

With these words Paul brings encouragement to a church living in a hostile, unbelieving community. Do you think that is where we are today, living in a hostile, unbelieving community? Maybe not the immediate community of West Sayre PA but certainly in our world it is easier to point to "opponents" of the church than it is to point to the ones on our side. Hostility to the Christian religion exists in many places, some hostilities are obvious and some hide within the Christian community itself.

When this congregation of Philippians heard the words, "This is God's doing, for he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well" do you think they thought that a privilege? These are my questions, just because Paul desires to "depart and be with Christ" does that mean I must consider the struggle and suffering endured in the world a privilege? I certainly know that I am no better than anyone and certainly am no better than Jesus Christ – so knowing he suffered and died a horrible death I know that my suffering is nothing at all compared to that. I know that the suffering of the followers of Christ is miniscule compared to his suffering, and I know that being a follower of Christ in any culture means being different.

Being different means one might suffer. In our current culture, when co-workers or neighbors know you are a Christian they might be less inclined to include you to their back-yard keg parties because of course you would not be any fun to be around. If you are known to be a Christian, some people might avoid you or treat you as different. Of course, as a follower of Christ, you would most certainly treat people differently than non-believers, you would be more forgiving and tolerant of differences. Certainly, your life would reflect a change from how you lived before. The struggle for any follower of Christ is how to live for Christ when you would rather live with Christ – the same struggle Paul expresses in this letter.

The parable that Jesus tells in what was read from Matthew's gospel this morning illustrates this struggle as well. The "landowner" was grumbled against because of how each of the workers were paid. Those who came first and worked longer complained they should receive more than those who were last. The message in that parable is the landowner was free to do what he wanted with what belonged to him – God does as God pleases with God's creation. Even those who come to faith late in life, even the thief on the cross received the same reward. That is the

same message God gives to Jonah in our first reading. God treats all of God's creation with the same mercy, compassion, and love – and whether the first is last or the last is first all are equal.

No where in our worship service is that more apparent than when we come to this table to share with all believers the body and blood of Christ. God's abundant grace came to the people of Nineveh. God's abundant grace came to the workers in the vineyard. God's abundant grace came to the church in Philippi, and it continues to come to us today – here at this table. Here, once again, we see God's abundant goodness. Here, once again, we see God's steadfast love. All are welcome at this table of grace. Come to celebrate the mystery of our faith, **Christ died. Christ is risen. Christ will return to judge the living and the dead.**