

Shine Like Stars
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 10, 2022-PM Service
Reverend Mike Hoogboom
Philippians 2:12-18

Paul loved the church in Philippi. Notice how he greets them in the opening of his letter, “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” (Phil. 1:3-4)

On that first day it was women who began partnering with Paul in the work of the gospel. The church of Philippi was planted among women. Remember in Acts 16 there was no synagogue in the city, and so Paul and Silas went down to the river and found God fearing women praying together. From that first day until the day that Paul writes to them from his imprisonment in Rome – Lydia, a business women and benefactress has led the church. This church which was made up of Gentiles in a Gentile city, was clear fruit of the good news that Paul preached – that God was forming a new people – Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, males and females. Paul loves this church of Philippi.

Paul also loves the church’s work of spreading the gospel in a dark city. There’s no doubt that Philippi was a dark city. As a colony of Rome it became a magnet for retired military officers. It’s the kind of place where men exploit demon possessed slave girls for money. And when the slave girl is set free, Paul and Silas are beaten and imprisoned without a hearing – something they were entitled to. Philippi is the kind of place where powerful people can manipulate the justice system. Philippi is a dark city.

Now sometimes Paul writes letters that provide comfort to churches that are being persecuted. And it is likely that the church is feeling that pressure. But fear of the darkness infiltrating the church is only a minor plot line in this letter. Paul’s main message in this letter is to address the fractures taking place inside the church.

One of the question that arises from Philippians is this: how do saved people live out/ work out their salvation within a community of other saved people so that the church shines like stars in the dark universe? Or an earthy way to ask the question: how do saved people who get on each other’s nerves, live out their salvation in a way that shines light into a dark culture?

It’s pretty clear that the members of the church in Philippi were getting on each other’s nerves. Paul’s concern here is that the church is being torn apart from the inside by grumbling and complaining (2:14). The problem is a familiar one. Even though he didn’t have email or social media to examine, Paul hears about the grumbling church members in Philippi.

I wonder if they grumbled about some of the same sort of family squabbles we have in the church today. Today we grumble about all sorts of things. A church can’t change the color of the carpeting without grumbling. The installation of our handrails, prompted grumbling. We grumble when the sanctuary is too hot or too cold. We grumble if coffee is regular and should be decaf.

What did the church in Philippi grumble about? Did the household of Lydia, the businesswomen and the household of the jailer -- have a simmering feud about whose lasagna was the most popular at the church potluck? Or maybe, did Syntyche and Euodia – both women who worked side-by-side with Paul – grumble about the lack of volunteers? Paul urges the church to help these women with their work. (4:2-3)

But Paul doesn’t explain the content of the grumbling. He is warning them against the habit of grumbling, Paul isn’t concerned about the topic people grumble about. He seems to be saying that grumbling in the church of Philippi is a sign, a symptom of a deeper problem. The hint that Paul links to grumbling is a symptom of a deeper problem comes from verse 15. That phrase “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation” comes from Deuteronomy 32:5.

Deuteronomy 32 is Moses final sermon to the “Next Generation” Israelites before he dies and they enter the promised land. Moses looks back at the ancestors who bickered like children on a long road trip. They complained about the food, the water, the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. They complained about waiting at Mt. Sinai, and they complained about the giants. Moses tells the second generation that the complaining of that first generation revealed their lack of love and trust in God who liberated them from Egypt. And once their love and trust had been eroded they put their trust in other things, other gods, golden calf, leaders that told them what they wanted to hear. The complaining of the first generation Israelites revealed their underlying lack of trust.

Paul seems to be warning the church that grumbling signals an erosion of love and trust for one another, which is the fruit of a lack of love and trust for God. And the failure of trust diminishes the church’s radiance in the dark culture. When I read Paul’s vision of the church shining like stars that point lost people home, I think of Vincent VanGogh’s painting entitled “Starry Night.” The painting is divided in three elements. There is the top section is a stunning impression of the heavens as spirals of blue that chase each other across the heaven, punctuated by bright yellow stars and crescent moon. There is the cypress tree in the foreground that extends into the heavens. And then there is the village with the window shining yellow in the darkness – a reflection of the stars in the heavens. It wasn’t until I was reading an analysis of the painting by art historian – Kathleen Powers Erickson – this week that I noticed that not all of the buildings in the village reflect the light of the stars. She points out that the only building that fails to reflect the brilliance of the stars in the night sky is the church.

Paul is concerned that the love and trust in the church in Philippi – for each other, for God – is being torn apart and they are in danger of ceasing to shine the light of Christ like stars in a dark world. Paul says, grumbling and arguing pulls apart the

fabric of love and trust of a Christian community. What does Paul offer the church that can knit a stronger fabric of love and trust? The answer that Paul provides is easy to discern. He is crystal clear about his expectation for the church. “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” (2:5) We see Jesus’ mindset in the action of letting go of his position and moving toward the tear, brokenness, and darkness.

Jesus let go of the glory of heaven and made his dwelling with us and becomes a refugee, he has no place to lay his head. Jesus let go of being Lord and master and made himself a servant. He touches lepers, forgives adulterers, sets tax collectors free, and washes his disciples’ feet. He let go of being immortal God and made himself human. As a human he grew in stature, he learned the Torah, and how to plumb a wall, or seal a boat. His feet got blisters, sweat drops of blood, and dies on a cross.

As Jesus let go and moved toward brokenness and darkness he knits the frayed fabric of this creation back together again. By his resurrection the broken is made whole, the torn is mended, and the darkness gives way to the light. In a similar way, when the church moves toward need and brokenness our love and trust for both God and each other is strengthened. And for people who are lost in this dark culture the church can be a north star showing them the way home.

Friends, this letting go of self-interest to serve the interests of others is happening in our church. There are stories from Crossroads Prison Ministry, Colossian Way, Challenging Conversations, pastoral care visits, youth ministry, and our Kid’s Hope program. I’ll share one story from our Kid’s Hope program. One of the strengths of our Kid’s Hope program is that over the years of consistent service we’ve developed good relationship with the faculty and staff. All of the mentors contribute to this, and our directors Elizabeth and Lisa are the constant presence at Congress school and get to know teachers well.

This story happened a few years ago with one of the teachers – I’ll call her Jill – not her real name and she is no longer at Congress. Elizabeth was in the process of getting to know Jill and beginning to build up some trust when Jill asked,

- J: Elizabeth where do you get these people who volunteer?
- E: Well, they all come from our church. LaGrave church it’s not far from here.
- J: What do you do to get them to volunteer?
- E: I invite them, if that’s what you mean.
- J: I mean; do you pay them?
- E: No, they do not get paid. They feel called to serve other people. This is how they serve.
- J: Ok, but they must get something in return for their work. Like, do they get points for heaven?
- E: No, that’s not how heaven works. God’s love is a gift. We serve as a way to thank God for his gifts of grace.

That was it. There was no camera there to catch it on livestream. No angel choirs that we could hear. Almost unremarkable. A year passed and Jill faced a dark crisis. In that time other mentors had gotten to know Jill and they demonstrated their love for Jill – simply without fanfare they walked with her through that dark valley.

Jill has moved from Congress, but she and Elizabeth are still friends. She’s been to church a few times. It was the steady, faithful, service of mentors giving up time every week to serve students that shone like light to a teacher like Jill whose life was marked by darkness.

Paul’s vision for the church is that we are a north star in a dark world that can show people who are lost the way home to Jesus. We cannot participate in that mission by retreating into our own self-interests. By letting go of our self-interest and serving the needs of others the church shines and people lost in darkness find the way home. Amen.

© Rev. Mike Hoozeboom