
BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

Anyone familiar with the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians knows that joy is a prominent theme in the letter. Sixteen times it's emphasized. Sixteen. But remember, this is a letter from prison. "I'm in prison for Christ" (1:13), Paul says. His body is locked up, but his spirit is free. Prison doesn't have to imprison your soul. Paul, along with others throughout history like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr., have proven this as their words in letters from prisons have had powerful effects, reminding us that prisoners can be our professors.

Yet, this context—jail time—obviously impacts one's life, heart, and mind, just as wherever you are, shapes your life. Geography influences biography. Being in a prison presses in on Paul's mind and heart in a way that we may have never imagined or considered. There's not only joy in this letter. The Old Testament readings assigned for today illumine another theme in Paul's letter: that is, death. In the Exodus reading, the Israelites complain, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt" rather than dying of hunger in the wilderness. They wanted to die in order not to experience any difficulties in life. In the Jonah reading, Jonah says, "And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" all because he was upset about God's mercy toward the Ninevites. He wants to die because he's angry about God's graciousness. In both Old Testament scriptures, the people want to die because they are unhappy with how God is handling a situation. Though different, Paul speaks of death too.

"I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die. Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better." Paul isn't upset with God. He loves God and wants to be with Christ, which is why he speaks of dying. We didn't need COVID-19 to deal with death. Just read this letter of Paul from prison. "Dying is even better" or as other translations put it, "dying is gain."

One commentator notes that the language Paul uses here—"dying is gain"—is the typical language used for ancient discussions about suicide. Maybe imprisonment was taking a physical and mental toll on Paul. He wasn't a Marvel superhero. He endured so much suffering in his ministry because of the gospel, which is why when he says that through prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will lead to his deliverance (v.19; cf. Job 13:16-18), he uses the language of the biblical character Job, who was a "blameless and upright" man yet endured horrific suffering. Paul was in prison because of the gospel of Christ and maybe it was becoming too much to handle, so he felt like Job, leading him to say, "dying is gain." Perhaps death was seen as a gain over a life of trouble and affliction and sorrow and struggle and hunger and privation and pandemics. The struggle is real, even for Paul, an apostle, a missionary, a servant of Christ, a man of God.

A recent article called "Too Many Pastors are Falling on Their Own Swords" makes the point that even pastors have suicidal ideations. One pastor was on a Zoom call with ten other pastors in the last several months and four out of the ten admitted they had thoughts of suicide recently. The intense time in which we live and doing ministry in it can be too much for some, no matter their calling, their denomination, their economic status, their family situation, their friendship group, their location or even the number of years they've been in ministry. That phrase—"dying is gain"—is not just ancient language but can be a contemporary reality. The weight of these challenging days can add up for pastors—losing church members or loved ones to COVID-19; losing their church jobs; unhappy congregation members threatening to leave the church if it does or does not open; having to lay off staff members due to the economic impact of the coronavirus; preaching about race and having a church member angry enough to stop by and kick your office door off a hinge to start a fight. This and more can make pastors fall on their own swords. You don't have to be in prison to be in pain. The struggle is real these days and perhaps always has been.

In fact, Paul is having his own internal struggle. He's torn within. He is "betwixt and between," meaning, neither one thing nor the other. He's in the middle. He's in a liminal space. Betwixt and between. Listen to what he says: "Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better. If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better. However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake. I'm sure of this: I will stay alive and remain with all of you to help your progress and the joy of your faith..." Paul wrestles with living and dying and he's a Christian! He's betwixt and between. There's a "mixture of certainty and uncertainty, deciding and not deciding, wanting to die and wanting to live" (Fred Craddock). He's struggling with what to do; he knows some things and doesn't know other things. He tells them that he'll visit them again but then says, "whether I come and see you or I'm absent and hear about you." Make up your mind Paul! He's torn in so many ways that there's obvious irresolution.

I want to leave. I want to stay. I know. I don't know. I'm coming. I may not come. Betwixt and between. The wrestling, the struggle, the uncertainty, are so often aspects of the life of faith, if we are honest. **In the Gospel of Mark**, a father brings his son to Jesus because "[his son] has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid..." The father, though he brought his son to Jesus for healing, embodies a state of faith summed up in his words to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:17-29). Betwixt and between like so many of us.

Often faith resides in irresolution, in a tension, as it was with Paul who was an apostolic leader in the church. And in this liminal reality, we become hard pressed and don't know where to go or what to do or what to say. We find ourselves betwixt and between. If we're honest, many people of faith find themselves in this situation right now. Maybe you find yourself in this situation right now. "I'm torn." "I'm not quite sure what to do or what to say or where to go."

But in difficult times, in tense times like what we're experiencing now in our world, we often discover who we really are and what we are made of and what we truly believe. Our values can become clearer. For Paul, his values and sense of purpose do not change while in prison, do not shift just because he's suffering, do not waver even though he's wavering on some decisions. He's clear about his values.

Prison doesn't imprison him at his core. His circumstances don't circumvent the call of God on his life, his values or his purpose. And what is at his core? Christ and the gospel. His values don't change. He's consistent. Even when he says that some preach Christ from dishonest motives, he says, "since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad." What matters to him is the proclamation of Christ. Remember, he's in prison for Christ and believes that what has happened to him has actually "advanced the gospel." Remember, for Paul, the gospel, as he says in Romans, "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith..." (Rom 1:16). The gospel is the power of God at work. And we need the gospel now more than ever. We need the power of God to be at work more than ever. This is Paul's purpose—to share the gospel of Christ—and that continues despite his circumstances. His values are the compass for his vocation; such clarity of purpose even when suffering. His body is trapped but his spirit is free to still maintain his core values.

He leads a purpose-driven life; in his case, one dedicated to Christ's gospel. Later in this letter, he says, "I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ..." (3:8). Prison doesn't prevent Paul's proclamation of Christ because even this letter to the Philippians from a jail cell is proclamation and found within the biblical canon. This is his life, and nothing can steal what his life is all about. What is your life? What is your life all about? Who is your life? Who is your life all about? We are living at a time when we've been given the opportunity to reflect on who we are at our core. A global pandemic is an ideal time to reevaluate your life and your priorities and your values. What is important to you? Who is important to you? What is your 'why,' your purpose? Why do you live? What do you care about the most? What do you hate the most? Who are you really?

We don't have to be in a prison to ponder over our lives. We are in a pandemic and there is so much pain—health-wise, economic, social, and political—and it is a matter of life and death for many. The way we live and work together in society across the various sectors has been altered. And for some, like the pastors I described, “dying is gain” and they aren't thinking about Jesus; they just want to leave this world and all of its pain and isolation—students, faculty, and staff. This is a betwixt and between time, an uncertain, unclear, fragile historical moment, a liminal space.

This is where we find ourselves, if we are honest, and to me, it's a time to recenter ourselves and recover our core spiritual values. Paul points us to what we should be all about and who we should be all about: Christ and the gospel.

Even amid our irresolution on so many levels—our inner tensions—there is a God in Christ who understood being betwixt and between. You know his story, don't you? In Philippians 2, we learn that 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.”

Jesus was in the form of God yet came to earth in human form. He was both divine and human in his body. He was betwixt and between in his very own being. He was betwixt and between heaven and earth. He was betwixt and between transcendence and immanence because he is a liminal Lord. There is suffering and there is salvation because Paul continues after recounting Christ's death, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” There was a descent and then an ascent. In Jesus, there is death and there is life; there is sorrow and there is hope; there is a cross and there is a crown. He is an incarnate God who knows what it means to live betwixt and between because he did. And he's acquainted with our grief, our sorrow, our infirmities, our irresolution, and entered the middle of our human mess and was torn for it.

Christ's body was torn right in the middle of two thieves on a cross—he was torn between the two. In that moment, he was betwixt and between human pride on one side and humility on the other, dying on a cross, to be in the struggle with us—in our suffering, in our uncertainty and unresolved issues of life, in our knowing and unknowing, in the middle of our indecision, in our wrestling and struggle. This is where he came. This is where he is because this is who he is as our divine-human, liminal, cruciform God.

We may want everything fixed right now. We may seek resolution to everything right now but what Paul reveals is that so much of life in Christ is living in the irresolution at the foot of the cross and accepting this is what it means to follow the way of Christ. We won't necessarily receive answers or gain clarity immediately; Paul didn't.

Rather, we are called to sit at the foot of the cross, a liminal, betwixt and between space in the confusion and the uncertainty that followed Christ's crucifixion, when it appeared that the Messiah had died forever and along with him all of our hopes and dreams. Sit there at the foot of the cross; there, you can't rush to a resolution because you can't rush God's redemption. Our life in Christ is on God's terms.

So maybe, just maybe, at the cross in the light of the resurrection, we are called to suffer and struggle for at least three days and most likely more. In Paul's own words to the Philippians, following Jesus includes “being conformed to his death so that [we] may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead” (3:10-11). So today, we hope in faith that the resurrection of Jesus will ultimately redeem all of our irresolution, all of our anxiety, all of our uncertainty, once and for all. This is our hope.

Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.