

A Tragic Divide

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So even among Jesus' disciples, there was an issue of competition, trying to climb over the other guy. Well, I'm not preaching on the Gospel lesson – we're in the second week of a series on Paul's letter to the Philippians, of course – but this little episode sets the stage rather well for what we're going to find in Philippians chapter 2. Philippians 2; I love this chapter. It's the chapter where Paul says to the Philippians, "Make my day." We'll get to that in a minute.

As we heard in our sermon series on Acts a few weeks ago, when the apostle Paul and his team crossed over that narrow strait of water between Turkey and Greece, the gospel finally arrived in Europe. They planted their first congregation in the town of Philippi, and, after leaving, Paul later wrote them this "Letter to the Philippians" now found in the New Testament.

This past *week*, though, before working on this sermon, I set out on what most pastors would say was a fool's errand: I put together a series of five devotionals in which I tried to cover, or at least survey, Paul's majestic and much larger letter to the *Romans*. I called the series "Romans in 5 Bites," and I hope it worked for you. My apologies if it didn't. Either way, I hope you do at some point seriously work your way through the entire letter; it's well worth the effort.

The last of those five "bites" related to something that we'll be hearing in Philippians 2 this morning. In that fifth devotional, I mentioned Karl Barth, not a Lutheran but perhaps the most influential theologian of the twentieth century. Through his work, the church was called back from the precipice – challenged to return to its centering on Christ, the Cross and the Resurrection instead of continuing down the slippery slope of humanism and what was sometimes called a "social gospel."

By the time I was in seminary, half a century later, there was a clear divide between those who continued to stand for the "social gospel" – focusing the church on social projects – and those who focused on Christ, the Cross and the Resurrection. Looking at all that, I clearly took *my* stand on the centrality of Christ, Cross and Resurrection. Today, that divide has, in some ways, only become wider.

And, today, with *another* half century almost having passed since my early seminary years, I've had some time to reflect a bit more on all of this – which leads to my sermon title, "A Tragic Divide."

I call it "tragic" because, over the years, I've come to sense, more and more, that it's not simply a binary thing, not a simple either/or. I haven't budged on my conviction that the absolute center and solid foundation in scripture is Christ, Cross and Resurrection – the fact that, in spite of our rebellion against God, God entered our world in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, to die and be raised again and thus to bring us back to himself. That's the gospel in its simplest form. Gospel means good news, and, my friends, it is very, very good news, indeed.

But already in the time of Paul there were those who were content to *leave* it at that rather than ask, "So what then? This is wonderful news, indeed; what should be our response to it?" And so, we have things like the letter of James which, as I think you know, says in several ways that "faith without works is dead." That is, faith must lead to something. A relationship with Jesus

changes who we are. We do things differently as a result. The letter of James says, “If I don’t see a difference in your life, I have to question your faith.”

Paul himself will even surprise us on this point. Now, I, as a good Lutheran – as a good *justification-by-grace-through-faith* Lutheran – have often quoted Ephesians 2:8-9 over the years:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast.

And that’s absolutely right-on true. That’s the gospel in a nutshell just like the well-known John 3:16. But, to avoid the “tragic divide,” we need to go on to the very next verse where Paul continues with

For we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

In other words, by grace through faith God has reclaimed you as his child; and now he has prepared some things for you to do. And today we’ll find something at first surprising, but finally similar, when we get deep into Philippians 2. In Philippians 2:12, Paul writes:

Therefore, my dear friends ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ...

Work out your own salvation?? Well, Paul doesn’t mean just figure it out for yourself, or work hard so that you earn God’s approval. Rather, the Greek verb here means “work it out” as in “demonstrate it,” “perform” your salvation, “show it” to the world. Just like James says. And, again, it’s the very next verse – verse 13 – that makes this clear:

for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

So, to divide these two things – salvation in Christ and the social activity and action which come in response to that salvation – is, as I said, a tragic divide.

Now, how Paul gets to this point in Philippians 2 is important and has a lot to say to us as free and independent Americans.

Philippians is interesting because, in this letter, Paul has no agenda to address. He’s not putting out fires, like he is in Galatians, or in 1 & 2 Corinthians. He’s simply giving thanks to the folks in Philippi for supporting and encouraging him while he’s in prison for the gospel; and yet, there *is* an issue – an issue that is common to all of us.

Chapter 1 ended with Paul noting that the Philippians themselves were engaged in the same struggle he was – in bringing the gospel to a world that often opposes it. You see, the gospel is always counter-cultural – it’s always running up against the culture wherever it appears.

When we were in Tanzania, there was the issue of sacrifices made to the ancestors – something a Christian is not to do, obviously. So, what was a pastor to do when he was called to come and bless a new bus that someone had bought for his company and, upon arrival, found feathers and blood on the front seat indicating that a sacrifice had just been made before he arrived? Should he refuse to do anything more and just leave? Ancestor worship is incompatible with Christian faith, after all. Or was it a teaching moment? In *Paul’s* day, the counter-cultural nature of the gospel became a life or death matter. The Romans were saying “Caesar is Lord.” The gospel flies in the face of that, saying that only Jesus is Lord. That cost some lives; we call them martyrs. Again and again, the gospel will challenge and cut across the cultural grain wherever it

appears – and so it’s important for us as God’s people to be on the same page and work together. Paul thus begins chapter 2 by saying

So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy [or, as I suggested earlier, “Make my day”!] by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

In other words, “make my day” by all of you being on the same page. It’s not that they were way off base, like the Galatians or Corinthians were at times, where Paul had to exert his authority as an apostle. Rather, here he pleads with this faithful congregation which had gathered together with strong convictions and dedication to the gospel – and an intensity that can sometimes lead to friction and disunity. Later, in chapter 4, we’ll hear of two women who were apparently getting into each other’s stuff – and Paul asks his readers to “help these women, for they have labored side by side with me in the gospel.” A call for unity. Back now in chapter 2, Paul continues in verses 3 and 4:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Here, he goes beyond a mere call for unity to an exhortation to put the rights and interests of others before our own. And here’s where, in terms of the gospel being counter-cultural, we may find it challenging *us* a bit.

You see, most of us – myself included – are real sensitive to having our toes stepped on, real touchy about not getting our rights. Think of the heated words flying recently, in Gary Richards’ “Roadshow” column in the paper, between bicyclists and motorists on Highway 9. Our nation was founded upon gaining and maintaining our rights: “No taxation without representation,” “Don’t tread on me,” and so on. King George was sent *packing* over issues such as this. That makes it rather interesting for us as Americans to discover that the Bible doesn’t actually *say* anything about our rights. Rather than making sure that we get our rights, rather than making sure we get what’s due us, the Bible takes a rather different approach.

It begins as soon as God’s people *are* a people ... right after God has rescued the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. At that point, we again and again hear words like these from Leviticus 19:

The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. Lev 19:34

Even in those early days when slavery was still allowed, those who became enslaved had to be released after a fixed period of time. Why?

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today. Deut 15:15

In Deuteronomy 24:

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. ... When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless

and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this. Deut 24:17-18, 21-22

And when it comes to actual rights in the Bible, nowhere does it speak of our *own* rights. Interesting. Rather, again and again – especially in Proverbs, a collection of sayings possibly used in training up the youth of the nobility – the focus is on the rights of the poor, the afflicted, the needy

A righteous man knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge. Prov 29:7

It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Prov 31:4-5

Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are left desolate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, maintain the rights of the poor and needy. Prov 31:8-9

And Jeremiah the prophet cries out

For wicked men are found among my people; ... they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD. Jer 5:26-29a

And that's about all the Old Testament has to *say* about "rights."

The New Testament, also, speaks only of either looking to the rights of others, as we just read here in Philippians, or of giving *up* our rights for the *sake* of others. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul *does* start asking about his rights as he and his team travel around the Mediterranean preaching the gospel. "Don't we have the right to be supported in this with our food and drink?" he asks. "Don't we, like others, have the right to have a wife with us?" Yet he then immediately flips it and says

But I have made no *use* of any of these [rights], nor am I writing this to secure any such provision. ... What then is my reward? Just this: that in my preaching I may make the gospel free of charge, *not* making full use of my right in the gospel. 1 Cor 9:15,18

Now we've just been moving all around in the Bible, to see how often this rather counter-cultural point is made. Let's come back to finish up where we started – in Philippians 2 – where we find Paul making a most interesting move. Having just said, in verses 3 and 4

in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

He goes on to give an example of what he means – a very striking example. In fact, he may be quoting an early hymn and, if so, it would be the earliest Christian hymn that we know of. He writes:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Right after this, Paul mentions “working out our salvation,” as we’ve heard, and to do so without grumbling. The rest of the chapter has Paul talking about Timothy and Epaphroditus, a fellow whom the Philippians had sent with their gift and message for Paul.

So that’s Philippians, chapter 2. The payload is in the first half of the chapter where Paul’s words steer us clear of what at times has become a “tragic divide” in the church, and bring to us the very counter-cultural challenge of the gospel. For followers of Jesus in Paul’s day, Caesar is not lord; in Tanzania, followers of Jesus are not to offer sacrifices to the ancestors; and here at home, the Bible hands us our *own* counter-cultural challenge: when it comes to rights and interests, our *first* concern should not be to start demanding our own – because, as Paul notes, we, as disciples of Jesus, follow the One who didn’t put *his* own rights and interests first but rather “emptied himself, ... humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” Now, certainly, there will be times when we need to stand up for ourselves – Paul did that a time or so. But in those times, scripture and the example of Jesus call us first to step back for a moment and ask how, in this situation, God would have us be part of what he is doing in the world – part of advancing the gospel.

In a way, Paul could, in his letter to the Philippians, be talking directly to us here at St Timothy’s. He is basically giving thanks for them; there are no particular issues as there were in other congregations. But they, like we, were human beings with all the self-centered tendencies that being human involves. We all want to hang on to our rights and our stuff.

So, Paul issues a call for unity – but not just unity in general. Rather, Paul calls them – and us – to a particular kind of unity, a unity that results from working out our salvation – that is, a unity that comes out of our looking at our salvation – what God has done for us – and performing that salvation, doing it, showing it, as only God’s people can do. Again, think of Israel, freshly redeemed from slavery in Egypt, and God saying to them, “Now – look at what I have just done for you. That’s how I want you to treat those you meet along the way – especially the fatherless, the widow and the foreigner in your midst.” And all God’s people said “Amen.”

Likewise, today, my fellow follower of Jesus: think of yourself, redeemed, justified, freed from the penalty of how you have lived your life – freed because of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus – and God now saying, “Make my day. Look at what I have done for *you*. That’s how I want *you* to treat those *you* meet along the way – especially those folks society has bumped to the side of the road.” And all God’s people say ... “Amen.”