

It is finally here! After months of planning, prayer, and saving our money, we are now ready to embark on our mission to South Africa. It feels like the preparation was a journey in and of itself! Without a doubt, it was a part of our journey!

Our life of faith is a journey – one we started when we said yes to the gospel of Christ. And this journey to South Africa is but one part of our larger faith journey. Still, it is significant and I pray that our faith will be challenged and strengthened in our responding to God in this mission. I am confident that God will speak and move in us and through us in ways that we will have no way of knowing right now.

The Philippian church was also challenged to grow up in their faith journey. It brought Paul great joy to see how they met and responded to such challenges to their faith. Thus, Philippians is often called Paul's "joy letter."

Philippi probably resembles our context and time. Philippi sat in northeast Greece, located eight miles from the sea, and was an important cosmopolitan city which was constructed by Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. In world history, Philippi was the place where the battle between Brutus and Cassius, the assassination of Julius Caesar, and Antony and Octavian took place in 42 B.C.

Philippi was also an ethnically and religiously pluralistic city. People practiced many faiths and customs there, many times combining them (called syncretism). Indigenous Thracian deities coexisted with the imperial cult, the classical Greco-Roman gods, as well as those from Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere.¹

Yet it is the imperial cult which frames the life of the people in Philippi as well as the struggles with which the church faces. For the government required allegiance to the Caesar, also known as a lord, messiah, and king, above any other deity. For Christians who asserted that Jesus was Lord, Savior, and Messiah, this put them at odds with the government. Thus, they were persecuted second class citizens.

Yet Paul has reason to be happy and calls for his friends in the church he founded in Philippi to remain hopeful and joyful in the face of suffering. Acts 16 tells the story of the founding of the church in Philippi and in the story Paul shows first hand how to maintain joy in the face of suffering. It is here that Paul and Silas are jailed and who, in the middle of the night, sang song to the Lord.

I hope you are encouraged as we study Philippians together. It is my prayer that such a daily study will only be the jumping off point for deeper discussions and reflections each day while in South Africa. In the experiences of ministry here and in the devotion we give, may God's grace, peace, and joy fill our lives.

Matthew

¹ Hawthorne, Gerald *Philippians* Word Biblical Commentary, Waco, Tx. p. xxxiv

Sunday, October 4

Philippians 1:1-11

I thank my God every time I remember you.

Learn to love appropriately.

We have made it! As we open our first full day on the African continent what are you thinking and feeling? Excitement? Wonder? Awe? Anxiousness?

In traveling here remember, we represent a community from home. This community, Haymarket Baptist Church, has helped inform our worldview and define our relationship with Christ. Now, being so far from home, and representing this community, how does Paul's greeting to the Philippian Church resemble your thoughts about our church? Can you join him these weeks in rejoicing in the people and community that you represent while here in South Africa?

Likewise, you are on the cusp of meeting, working, and living among a people of faith who look and live differently than we are accustomed. The struggles they face and the things that bring them joy may be things we take for granted or can't easily identify. Still, while there will be differences, there will be much we hold in common. By the end of our journey, may it be our prayer to rejoice and thank God every time we think of our brothers and sisters in South Africa.

Paul's prayer for the Philippians is that their "love overflow more and more with knowledge and insight." The Message phrases it this way – "Learn to love appropriately...so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush." Sentimental gush is easy and is feelings based. Intelligent, appropriate love is hard yet it is the kind of love that makes a difference – the kind of love Jesus practiced. May it also be our prayer during our journey here that our knowledge of love and our insight of how to love in the midst of a vast array of differing and difficult choices be strengthened.

What challenges do you perceive stand in the way of loving appropriately?

What will appropriate love look like?

What might South Africans teach us about appropriate love?

Monday, October 5

Philippians 1:12-18

“The imagination feeds our sense of anticipation for the possibilities in our actions.”
Charles Foster

Isn't it interesting how out of difficulty, even tragedy, there can come beauty? You might expect Paul to be upset about his current state, his imprisonment. Yet, Paul finds reason to be hopeful, even happy in every aspect of his situation. And is this any surprise? It was in Philippi that he and Silas sang hymns to God while prisoners in shackles.

In Philippi, indigenous deities were worshiped along with Greco and Latin gods. Of larger consequence, however, was the imperial cult worship – the worship of world leaders, particularly the Caesar. As long as the citizenry believed that the Caesar was essentially a deity, then the people could be held in check and a relative peace could be established.

It is no surprise, then, that when prophets and itinerant preachers came through proclaiming allegiance to anyone other than the Caesar, such voices were quickly quelled. Intimidation, imprisonment, and even death were means to stop such ideas.

Yet, Paul rejoices in finding himself in such a predicament. Instead of the gospel being silenced, Paul celebrates the fact that it grows stronger. Even his guards are interested. His imprisonment has also instilled confidence in the Christians in Philippi to speak boldly. The government no longer holds the imagination, the hope, and the allegiance of these people. Christ now fully embodies this for the Christians in Philippi.

History shows that when people are given a hope and purpose for their lives, not even intimidation and death can squelch their enthusiasm. History is full of tragic stories of governments and regimes that marginalized millions of people. History is also full of triumphant stories where people stood in solidarity for something larger than themselves and overcame. This is the theme that runs through the Biblical narrative.

How has this theme captured the spirit and imagination of the South African people? May God give us eyes and ears to see his presence among them today and throughout our time here.

Tuesday, October 6

Philippians 1:27-30

“There’s far more to this life than trusting in Christ. There’s also suffering for him. And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting.”

Philippians 1:29, *The Message*

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Fredrick Buechner

Today, we say goodbye to the beauty of Cape Town and the western cape as we travel to the eastern cape and East London. In doing so, we will be welcomed into communities of South Africans who live out their lives in specific ways. These are very communal people who share much of their life with one another. The Xhosa call this “Ubuntu.”

Paul encourages the Philippians to live out their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Quite a tall order! Can this be done on our own? The Greek verb used in this sentence is specific and refers to living as a citizen in a free state. It is the kind of living in which persons take an active role in the affairs of the state. For Greeks, the state was not just a place to live but was a partnership in which in which citizens worked together to attain the “highest of all human goods.” In a city of competing values and gods, how might this sentence have sounded to the ears of the Philippian church?

One implication is that belief in God through Christ requires action and that action will inevitably include suffering. Suffering can take different forms in different contexts. For the Paul and the Philippians, placing allegiance to God above the imperial cult (government) meant sure persecution if not death. Today, South Africans suffer in ways in which we in the US do not. And Christian South Africans face challenges that Christian Americans do not. As Christians living in a world that values the self above all else, we all will face suffering. Yet, Paul calls this suffering a privilege.

What is your understanding of suffering for Christ’s sake? Do we, as people living in a manner worthy of the gospel, also find privilege and pleasure in the living of our days?

Over the next ten days we will meet and mix with South Africans whose life and activities differ from ours in many ways. They are citizens of a different country with differing challenges. Still, for many of the people we encounter, we will hold one thing in common – Christ. What elements do we share that bind us as citizens under God? How do we suffer together for Christ’s sake?

Wednesday, October 7

Philippians 2:1-11

My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.
Desmond Tutu

Today, Paul continues to lay out his rationale of joyful suffering. Following his own experiences, Paul seems to be saying; if you are going to suffer for Christ, then don't suffer half-way!

What's the point of suffering if you are not fully committed? Those who are unsure about why they should take such a path filled with "suffering" will be discontent in such situations. But for those with a clear vision, they will find encouragement, consolation, and joy in suffering for Christ's sake.

What's more, Paul's main concern for this particular community is unity. If a community is going to suffer for Christ, then be sure that everyone is on the same page and be sure to unify such a purpose with love for one another. Paul seems to admit the obvious – suffering is not fun. But suffering together for a cause greater than oneself can be a source for great joy and meaning. Overcoming the ills of suffering can only be done joyfully when such a community is of one mind; not adding to one another's suffering by splitting into rival factions.

Certainly, Paul is fully invested in his call to be like Christ and consequently to suffer. The Philippians willingness to follow Paul's example will complete his joy (in the midst of his suffering). Paul clarifies here what joyful suffering looks like. Chiefly, that means putting others before yourself. To help the Philippians envision such sacrificial living, Paul paints one of his most famous and beautiful pictures of Christ's life and purpose. In this we find the secret to a life well-lived. A life of purpose. And the kind of life for which we are created.

In living among the Xhosa this week, in what ways do you see their community unified? What can we learn from them?

Thursday, October 8

Philippians 2:12-15

I have never thought that a Christian would be free of suffering, umfundisi. For our Lord suffered. And I come to believe that he suffered, not to save us from suffering, but to teach us how to bear suffering. For he knew that there is no life without suffering.

Cry, the Beloved Country

Pain and suffering, they are a secret. Kindness and love, they are a secret. But I have learned that kindness and love can pay for pain and suffering.

Rev. Stephen Kumalo

Cry, the Beloved Country

Reading Philippians, you get the feeling that Paul recognizes the fragility of anyone who is willing to be obedient to Christ's example. Given that followers will face persecution and be subject to infighting, Paul wants to keep the encouragement up. Keep up the great job you started! Don't let doubt or division divide you! Don't give up or give in!

With this in mind, Paul fills his letter with words of joy set against the acknowledgement that responding to the gospel of Christ requires hard work. No doubt, Paul believes that following Christ is a hard road but also the road that brings life, true fulfillment, and joy. His concern seems to be that those who began so well may give up in the face of such a hard task. No wonder his tone throughout is one of encouragement and joy; as if to say, keep enduring and following Christ because look what you will achieve!

To that end, Paul again reminds the Philippians to work out their salvation (together) so that they can fully invest their energy in the task that will ultimately bring them joy and God glory. To do this means they must approach their task with awe and reverence – both toward God and one another.

In doing so, the Philippians will shine out like stars in a crooked and perverse generation. This is the goal before them, and all Christians. But is the end goal to simply be a contrast of light against a dark world or was their call and ours today to be a kind of light that overcomes and dispels darkness? A kind of light that changes a crooked generation?

What do you think? Are most Christians attitudes (in our context) to be a kind of light that contrasts the darkness or a kind of light that consumes the darkness?

What is your attitude? Can this be done alone?

How can Haymarket Baptist Church be effective stars that shine light into our community?

Friday, October 9

Philippians 2:16-18

“One act of obedience is better than one hundred sermons”
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Talk about pressure! Paul, thus far has talked about his suffering (on Christ’s behalf for the Philippians) and their suffering for Christ (due to forces from outside the church and divisiveness inside). And then he lays this on the Philippians – “hold fast to these words and instructions so that my suffering will not be in vain!”

Paul likes to use the word “labor.” It becomes a metaphor for his ministry. In one way, Paul labors like an athlete who trains thoroughly and plays by the rules so that upon completion, will not be disqualified (labor in vain). Paul was also a tent maker. Skilled weavers in Paul’s day would work to complete as many pieces of cloth as needed in a given day and then turn them in at the end of the week for pay. Workers would find satisfaction in work well done but discouragement and embarrassment when their work was rejected as insufficient or incomplete. Here, to labor in vain also cost the artisan money.

While Paul was a tent maker, his investment had become the people to which he had given his life. Therefore, he doesn’t want his work to be disqualified or rejected due to the Philippians quarreling.

Paul follows this statement up with a “but” that injects the confidence he has in Philippians. They will not let him down. Their suffering, along with his, will concoct a perfect libation that will signify the completeness of their sacrifice. In the ancient world, both Jewish and pagan sacrifices were usually completed by a libation of wine poured out either on top of the sacrifice or at the foot of the altar. Paul’s current and future suffering for the gospel in general, and for the church in Philippi, in particular, act as a seal on whatever sacrificial service the Philippians make. And in this Paul rejoices.

So, just as an athlete basks in the victory of a race well run and an artisan is rewarded in work well done, so too should Paul and the Philippians rejoice in the sweat and tears that come in advancing the gospel of Christ. Rejoice in the work (and faith) required to bring good news to the poor, proclamation of release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (see Luke 4:18-19).

‘Cause anything worthwhile takes a little blood, sweat, and tears.

Saturday, October 10

Philippians 2:19-24

Hospitality...means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men or women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment.

Heri Nouwen

We are powerful people. And our actions and words can either serve as a weapon or medicine. One reason for Paul's letter to the Philippians is to remind them that their words and actions have caused both encouragement and division inside and outside the church. Paul is confident that Christ will use his words to the Philippians to re-orient their focus and to encourage them. In turn, Paul acknowledges how their words and gestures of encouragement have brought healing and renewal to his present stress. And he is confidently looking forward to the day when he can return to them.

Paul is so eager to bring help to the Philippians and to hear from them he announces his intentions to send Timothy in his stead. Doing so will bring joy to all involved. Paul also seems to make an elaborate defense as to why he chooses to send Timothy. Why he does this is not clear. The Philippians should know Timothy. Acts accounts for Timothy being with Paul at the founding of the Philippian church but is silent about Timothy's participation. Whatever the reason for Paul's defense of Timothy, it is certain that Paul believes so strongly in Timothy's worth that he addresses him as son and as like-minded. This is Paul's way of saying; whatever Timothy says is exactly what I would say.

Paul also indicates he is sending Timothy because no one else cares. Does Paul really mean that one around him cares for the gospel and for others? Scholars suggest different reasons as to why Paul may say this. One intriguing possibility is that this mission to the Philippians serves as an example of how Christians can differ radically in their evaluation of a particular mission within the church. Paul indicates that for him, the journey to Philippi is of utmost importance. To refuse this was "others seeking their own interest first." But, for others in the church where Paul is, might the welfare of a distant church in Philippi not be nearly as important as the pressing needs of the local church?

Whatever the reasons may be, Paul chose to send Timothy and he fully expects Timothy to be as helpful to the Philippians as he has been to Paul. What Paul seems to be saying is: accept, respect, and love Timothy. He is willing drop what he is doing to embark on a long journey for your sake.

Can you identify with Timothy?

Paul seems to address issues of hospitality on behalf of Timothy. How is Timothy's impending journey to the Philippians like the journey you are undertaking to the Xhosa?

How have you experienced encouragement so far on your journey?

Sunday, October 11

Philippians 3:1-11

We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low.

Desmond Tutu

Have you ever played the game “telephone?” You know the game where you sit in a circle and one person whispers a message to the one beside them? The message is then passed along the entire circle, one by one, until it makes its way back to the one who began the message. How often, at the end of the game, has that message become distorted? How much does the message become completely different from the intended meaning the person had at the beginning?

Have you ever been in a situation where what you did and how you did it meant more than why you did it?

What does following Christ really mean? What does it look like? Many have very firm, even passionate opinions in response to these questions, much of which have been influenced much more by their upbringing, context, and culture than anything else.

It is easy to look at a person and make judgments about her righteousness. Does she wear the right dresses? Speak the right words? Know the liturgy? Quote from memory Psalm 23 and John 3:16? Can she give the right answers? If not then she must be distant from God.

But throughout scripture, is this really how God recognizes those who do his will? Is this really the way he intended to redeem the world he loved and created? Or does the real intention get lost in translation?

The Jewish propensity to place more value on tradition, on the outward symbols reflects a human problem that has followed us throughout the years. We place more value on what we see than what we cannot. For Jews it was circumcision (the outward symbol of being God’s, *for men*) and for we Baptists, it is baptism. And that’s just the most obvious act. There were plenty more ways both the Jews of the Bible and we modern Christians display our piety.

But what does God really want? What kind of outward actions really reflect our heart?

Deuteronomy 10:16 “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.”

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Romans 2:29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal.

Monday, October 12

Philippians 3:12-16

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.
Jeremiah 17:7-8

Have you ever been a part of a great adventure, embarking on a journey that you knew you needed to be a part of, even if you could not fully explain why nor did you know what was around the next bend? (Wait a minute, might this just be one of those times?)

Paul seems to be saying the same thing to the Philippians, describing the journey that Jesus called him to begin. Paul is a little obscure when giving the details of just what this journey or goal is. While translations vary, the idea of the goal seems to be one of fully knowing Christ. Some translations quote Paul as saying “reaching out for Christ” or “pressing on to see whether I might apprehend Christ inasmuch as I was indeed apprehended.”

Part of an adventure is the fear factor. We may believe deeply in what we are being called to do, but have little idea what will ultimately come of such an adventure. Will it be worthwhile? Are we simply chasing windmills?

Paul seems to be clear that the adventure in which Christ apprehended him to is legitimate. But still, Paul admits to the Philippians that he hasn't got it all figured out yet. That he has to trust God in each step because although he tries, he can't see the road ahead. You have to wonder, if Paul knew about the prison stays, the shipwrecks, and the narrow escapes, would he have said yes to such an adventure in the beginning? But since he can't see the road ahead, his goal becomes to know more of the person who can, the one who has been there, done that.

Paul's admission to the Philippians may also be another way for the church to identify with Paul. While Paul assumes the spiritual leadership role for the Philippians, he too admits he endures the same fears, uncertainties, and hardships as they. What makes it worthwhile for Paul is his drive to keep his focus on Christ. He seems to say “the temptation to take your eyes off of Christ is to open yourself up for second guessing. To keep your focus on Christ is to set yourself up for victory.”

What distracts you from focusing on Christ?

What keeps you on the sidelines, not responding to the adventurous call of Christ?

How have you improved your focus on Christ during this adventure?

God of the miracles and the mundane, teach me to look for Jesus in the places I least expect. Help me to be aware of your presence in the everyday journey as well as the magical moments of life.

Tuesday, October 13

Philippians 4:1-7

Our journey in South Africa is not over yet, but our time here is drawing to a close. Certainly, we have experienced things here that have challenged us and moved us closer to God. In these last few days, begin to consider: How will I respond to these experienced once I return home? What will I do differently?

Our scripture today also begins Paul's conclusion to the Philippians. After his challenging and encouraging words, he begins his final instructions. The word "therefore" or "well then" is a conjunction that asks the readers to take action in response to what Paul has said (and the Philippians have experienced).

His first imperative is to stand firm. They have come this far and have given up so much. Don't give that up. Stand firm in the Lord. We, also, have come far. How will you stand firm upon returning to 'normalcy'?

His second imperative is to be of the same mind. Women were important persons in the church at Philippi and were among the founders. Here, Paul makes his appeal directly to two women – Euodia and Syntyche. Their stature in the church was so great Paul makes a direct appeal to them. This appeal reflects his instructions from chapter two: "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition."

Paul goes on to reveal that these women have struggled beside him in the work of the gospel, so the instructions to stand firm seem to apply to their situation. They should not let their disagreements set them or their community back. Instead, they should think of others and the gospel rather than getting their own way. Upon returning, what can you do to be of the same mind with others in our church? Do you think this can be done in all situations?

His third imperative is to rejoice in the Lord. As we re-enter our day-to-day joys and struggles, how will you rejoice? How will your faith in the Lord help you rejoice?

Fourth, Paul requests that the Philippians be known for their gentleness. Eugene Peterson translates verse five in this way: "Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them." This should not be taken as an "I'm OK, your OK" kind of attitude. Rather, it should be understood as one who relates to others based on their limitations. This could be contrasted against those like some Jewish Christians who demanded the Gentile Christians follow the letter of the law. In other words, love them for who they are, where they are. Don't expect perfection. (But don't let others settle for less than their potential.)

How might such "gentleness" promote same mind harmony?

Fifth, Paul instructs the Philippians to not worry, but give everything over to God. Have you experienced this in people or situations during our time in South Africa? Does Paul mean for his readers to forget their worries or pretend they are not real? What, then, is the key for Paul, when facing real anxiety in our lives and in the world?

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus today and upon our return.

Wednesday, October 14

Philippians 4:8-9

When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

God is everywhere – working in all things. God is creator of everything. Yet everything is not good and everything is not of God. Indeed, we might even go as far as to say there are things in this world that are good and can point to God, even when God is not to be found in them.

There is a code of conduct that most everyone, regardless of religious affiliation, can agree on as good. It was true in the days of the Philippians and it is true now. Paul tries to sum them up. “Things that are true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious - the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse; think on these things.” Paul is instructing his readers to be about the kind of things that anyone would recognize as good – the kind of things that would be attractive to people and not give them the creeps.

How does our attitude, our actions, and our speech, in our day-to-day routine, reflect excellence? Where do we need to improve?

But certainly Paul was not merely giving his readers these instructions for the sake of good etiquette. Rather, Paul wants the Philippians, by behaving themselves, to also act like followers of Christ. To take the “worldly” standard for conduct and add to it a life lived according to the gospel.

Paul, quite confidently, says his life is the example. Follow it. This is how it is done. I learned it from others (including Jesus) and I am passing it on to you.

Are there those in your life that have served as an example for Christian living? What about their lives make them above reproach among Christians and non-Christians?

For the Philippians, who lived in such an important and cosmopolitan city, these instructions were the key to a life well-lived in the service of Christ. Such a life would also include a life of standing firm in the face of ridicule and suffering. But Paul assured his readers that standing firm would produce an intimate relationship with the creator and giver of peace.

Eugene Peterson’s translations says this: “Do this, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.”

What melodies and harmonies has God played for you these two weeks in South Africa?

Thursday, October 15

Philippians 4:10-15

“Relationships are never about power, and one way to avoid the will to hold power over another is to choose to limit oneself – to serve. Humans often do this – in touching the infirm and sick, in serving the ones whose minds have left to wander, in relating to the poor, in loving the very old and the very young, or even in caring for the other who has assumed a position of power over them.”

-Sarayu, The Shack (Paul Young)

Today is our last in South Africa – this wonderful and beautiful place. It is a place that is still mysterious to us but one that we have come to know and love too.

As we pack our bags and prepare to leave, pray for South Africa, the people we have met, worshiped with, prayed with, celebrated with, and whom we have cared.

Pray for Jon, Dawn, Aly, and Khaya.

Paul also concludes his letter to the Philippians. His tone remains one that is hopeful and joyful. Once again Paul thanks his friends for their concern for him and their gifts to him. But while their gifts do bring him joy, it is not because of the money or things he receives. Rather, it is because of their love that they stand firm with him in all that he encounters for the sake of the gospel. It is their glad and willing sacrifices that bring him joy. It is as if he is saying, my investment in you did not come back empty! And your investment will not come back empty either. Instead, God’s work in our firm standing will yield much to the building of the church and to our relationship with God who will provide us peace, even joy in the midst of our work. (I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.)

How has God rewarded your investment in these two weeks?

How has our church been rewarded in the investment they have made?

In what ways will you invest in our church and community due to what you have experienced in South Africa?

God who invites me to be a part of something bigger than myself, help me to discover what that something bigger might be. As I walk further down the road of faith, guide me in the direction of your calling. Amen.