

**Philippians 3**  
**March 17, 2013**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**Fifth Sunday of Lent**

The letter to the Philippians is by far Paul's most joyful and unconflicted communication to his congregations. The Philippians have never rebelled against his authority or questioned his judgment. They have always communicated concern for Paul and for his ministry. This community, led largely by women who Paul baptized, has sent him a generous financial gift to ease his life in imprisonment. The carrier of the gift and bearer of love, a man named Epaphroditus, has been seriously ill but now is on his way home bearing Paul's gratitude and best wishes: which is why this chapter in the letter is so jarring.

This coarse warning against "the dogs" who teach the "mutilation of the flesh" is much more at home in the letter to the Galatians, Paul's most combative letter. It is why some scholars think that this is an insertion by someone at a later date. And yet, this passionate and angry statement and the familiar self justification which follows is vintage Paul. Indeed I believe it is vintage human.

The "dogs" as Paul so contemptuously calls them are not at work in Philippi. There is no evidence that the people who have disrupted the life of the church in Corinth or the churches in Galatia are disturbing the Philippians. In other places there are so called apostles taking advantage of Paul's imprisonment to discredit him and promote their own brand of believing. He refers to them earlier in the letter.

Before going further let me remind you that most likely Paul is dictating this letter. I picture him pacing back and forth in his place of confinement speaking aloud while his secretary

tries to keep up. As often happens while thinking aloud Paul stumbles across a strong emotion. His deep gratitude for the Philippians and their preciousness to him connects with his deep pain experience when others tore down what he had built up. This combines with his keen belief that Jesus is returning soon and that because of the dissension and confusion caused by these antagonists there are people who might have rejected Christ because of human sin.

Thus it does not surprise me that there would be this outburst. He wants the Philippians to know how he feels and to be prepared should they confront this threat from outside. I imagine being in Malawi and hearing that someone has come preaching a message which has thrown my congregation into turmoil. I would be outraged! I can only imagine the flaming emails that would shoot across the globe to express my chagrin!

A similar dynamic happens in Psalm 139. At the end of a long and beautiful poem to God David exclaims,

O, that you would kill the wicked O God! And that the blood thirsty would depart from me! Those who speak of you maliciously and lift themselves up against you for evil! Do I not hate them that hate you? And do I not loathe them who rise up against you? I hate them with a perfect hatred. I count them my enemies!

But then there is an abrupt shift. Having poured out his righteous anger on his and God's foes, David experiences a profound moment of conviction:

Search *me* and know *my* heart. Test *me* and know *my* thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in *me*; and lead *me* in the way everlasting.

I propose that Paul follows a similar path, although his transition is more gradual. Having vented his anger about "the dogs" Paul moves into what feels like self justification. He lists his credentials: tribe of Benjamin, circumcised according to the Law of Moses, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, taught by the greatest rabbi of the time.

Yet it is here, when he could use these credentials to discredit his enemies, like David, Paul moves inside to his personal spirituality. He tells the Philippians that whatever gain he might have been entitled to now feels like loss. He was striving after the wrong things. He was looking to promote himself when he could have been devoting himself full time to “the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ.” This is now Paul’s passion and his deepest desire for his sisters and brothers. For he deeply believes that if he devotes his life without reservation to knowing Jesus Christ and him crucified the resurrection life of Christ will pour through his life and into the lives of others.

There is a story from the desert tradition of Christianity that reveals Paul’s intensity. A young man comes to a desert monk and asks how to become enlightened. The monk leads him to a stream full of spring rain. Once the young man is on his knees the monk thrusts the man’s head down under the water and holds it there. Eventually the desperation of the man is such that he overpowers the monk and rises above the water to breathe. The monk says, “When you want enlightenment as much as you want to breathe, come back.” This captures Paul and accounts for his intensity. He wants to know Jesus Christ more than any other thing in his life.

But Paul knows that even his most loyal friends are not called to his life. He asks them to imitate his life, his priorities, his passion and to seek what he seeks in order that they become not more like Paul, but more like Jesus. It is his single minded passion for Jesus and the conviction that through undivided seeking we become more like Jesus that has resulted in Paul’s letters surviving to inspire us today.

Few of us would say that we want to know Jesus and his death and resurrection as much as or even more than this life. But we must admit that because of that we are divided inside

and out. We experience inner conflict and anxiety because we have divided loyalties. In the words of the hymn which we will soon sing, we are “charmed” by “vain things”—that is things that in the end give no lasting satisfaction and meaning.

Yet Paul recognizes that even he is nowhere near to this perfection as he would like which is why he stresses to the Philippians that this is a lifelong quest. He invites us, to borrow a phrase from the civil rights movement, to keep our eyes on the prize of knowing Jesus more completely. Paul believes that it is actually the Holy Spirit of God which inspires us to seek Jesus. When we are discouraged, it is the Holy Spirit of God that lifts our eye once again to him who beckons us to follow. And as we move toward Jesus we become more like him. And being more like him, we make Jesus more visible to the people around us. And we do this not simply as individuals. The power of Paul’s preaching is that when communities of Christians seek to know the Love of God in Jesus Christ *together* we become the very living body of Christ in the world.

Richard of Chichester in the 13<sup>th</sup> century wrote this prayer:

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,  
for all the benefits you have won for us,  
for all the pains and insults you have suffered for us.  
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,  
may we know you more clearly,  
love you more dearly,  
and follow you more nearly,  
day by day. Amen.

What if this became our prayer? Amen.