

WPC
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Be True, Be Kind, Be Brave
Philippians 1:12-18, 19-28

When my daughter Rebecca entered Bishop Blanchet High School last year, she got a bumper sticker that she put up on her bedroom window. The school mascot is a Brave, but they've revamped the image so it's no longer got anything to do with Native Americans per se. Instead it's about qualities they want to see in their students. So the sticker says, "Be True, Be Kind, Be Brave."

I like that – it's a good motto for life. And it certainly applies to the life of the Apostle Paul – he urges the Philippians to Be True by staying focused and centered on Jesus, the true Word of God; he cares for the Philippians and decides to Be Kind by encouraging them; and, as we'll see this morning, he shows them by example what it means to Be Brave.

This is now the second in a series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians, a letter Paul wrote while he was in a Roman prison. By the way, if you happen to be studying Philippians on your own at home, it's a good idea to read the whole letter in one sitting, for that's of course how the Philippians themselves would have read it.

Last week, we noticed how Paul began the letter. First, he prayed that the Philippians would remember that God was at work in their lives, and that God would complete the work he had started. Second, Paul prayed that the

Philippians would be able to think clearly and make sound judgments in their lives - that they would think widely, deeply, and use common sense.

In today's passage, Paul shares some autobiographical information, and in the process shows us his wider philosophy of life and how Jesus Christ remains a real presence to him, no matter how harsh the circumstances. It's important that the Philippians hear what Paul has to say, because, as Fred Craddock points out, "very likely there are some Christians in Philippi who are beginning to wonder if their church is really of God. If preaching the gospel gets you arrested, what will happen to us? Is Paul's fate to be ours as well? What's the point of being Christian anyway? Yes, Paul needs to interpret his chains." (Craddock, 24).

Let me point out an interesting thing that Paul says in v. 20: "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all *boldness*, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death."

The word translated 'boldness' comes from a Greek word which can be translated as 'full courage' but can also mean 'openness.' This gives us a tremendous insight into Paul's doctrine of courage, of what it means to act bravely. Courage does not mean being fearless. Paul's in a prison where the prisoners are being thrown into the arena to face lions. Courage for Paul means to be open to facing danger, even for a little while. As one commentator notes, being open in this sense means to hang in there just a little bit longer when you're scared to death.

Do you see what a difference that makes in our understanding of courage? Paul is not insisting that there's no danger. He knows otherwise.

What Paul is affirming is that Christians are able to bear witness to the word of God in spite of their fear. Their fear doesn't paralyze them to inaction or cause them to panic.

A great example of courage comes from one of my favorite movies, "The Wizard of Oz." The lion thinks he's a coward because he's always afraid, but in reality he shows tremendous bravery because his fear doesn't paralyze him into inaction. He stays with his friends even when they face grave danger from the Wicked Witch.

Let me now make two reflections on this passage. First, Paul shows us that the Gospel doesn't need an ideal setting to make its mark. Jesus Christ is able to make himself known in a less than ideal setting, because he's durable. The Gospel works in difficult and awkward places. It works when it's shared in a beautiful church setting, and it also works when it's proclaimed in hostile environments. God remains faithful.

And we see how durable the Gospel is in Paul's circumstances. He reports that his imprisonment has had the opposite of its intended effect. He says that the gospel has become known throughout the whole imperial guard (literally praetorium guard, a term used for guards assigned to the Roman emperor – this is why many interpreters believe Paul's writing from a prison in Rome itself).

As Eugene Peterson rephrases Paul's words, "Instead of being squelched, the Message has actually prospered. All the soldiers here, and everyone else too, found out that I'm in jail because of this Messiah. That piqued their curiosity, and now they've learned all about him."

Paul is saying that being in prison has actually helped to advance the Gospel, because he otherwise would not have had the chance to witness to the imperial guard. In fact, we often make the greatest discoveries of God's love in the awkward and difficult moments of our lives.

The Gospel is durable, it's tough, and so it doesn't need our protection. Many Christians tend to treat Christ and the Gospel as fragile, as if others might have the power to destroy the Gospel if we don't shield it from their attacks. Over the years, Christians have tried to 'protect' the Gospel from such things as advances in science and new historical-critical methods of studying the Bible. Paul reminds us that the truth of the Gospel will withstand any challenges. It doesn't matter if Christ is talked about in prison, or in a smoky bar, or in a casino, as long as he is talked about.

Paul claims that it doesn't even matter if some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry and selfish ambition; those things don't destroy the Gospel either. As Peterson paraphrases Paul's words, "I've decided that I really don't care about their motives, whether mixed, bad, or indifferent. Every

time one of them opens his mouth, Christ is proclaimed, so I just cheer them on!"

If you're unsure about Christianity, I always suggest reading the Gospels with an open mind. Bring your questions and doubts to the text, don't give it an inch. Over time, I believe the Gospel will eventually win your respect, because its truth will become evident.

My second reflection has to do with Paul's words near the end of this passage: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you." Paul is decidedly not suicidal. What he's saying is that since both life and death are in God's hands, we are free to act boldly and with courage.

Paul admits his need for the Philippians, for he asks for their prayers in conjunction with the help of the Holy Spirit. The flip side of that is that Paul also sees that others need him. He realizes that it's better for the Philippians if he remains and continues with them in faith. Some of us may have too little appreciation of how much we mean to others.

The film "It's a Wonderful Life" does a terrific job of showing how much our lives are interconnected and what a difference we make to others in our lives. We need to have balance. To paraphrase John Donne, no one is

an island - we all need others. But others also need us. It's easier to hang in there through the tough times when you can remember that others care about you and are depending on you.

Paul is able to stay encouraged and joyful even in prison because he knows that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is stronger and more durable than any difficulty we might be called to endure. It works in less than ideal situations, in the awkward places of our lives. And it's this gospel that allows him to remain brave in the face of being imprisoned.

I recently heard a story about what it might look like to have the kind of courage Paul talks about. If you were to take a trip down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, what kind of donkey would you want to ride? Would you want a donkey who was not frightened of rattle snakes? I wouldn't - it's good to be afraid of certain things. I'd want my donkey to be respectful of rattlesnakes, so that it wouldn't do something stupid to make the snake attack it (or worse yet, me). I'd also not want my donkey to panic because it might run off the cliff, with me still on its back.

No, the donkey I'd want is one that recognizes danger but will not panic or be paralyzed into inaction. That's what Paul is talking about when he writes about courage. What we want is to learn not to panic, to trust God to see us through. Thanks be to God that the Gospel is durable enough to

handle the difficulties of our world. And may God grant us the ability to face those difficulties with grace and courage. Amen.