

Faith Acts

January 17, 2010
Philippians 1: 3-11

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Thursday night, images of Haiti fill our vision. People cry out for help that is too slow to come. “We have no hospitals, no water, no food, nothing...” A father in a hospital waits for his daughter to be operated on... “she’s fighting,” he says, “but she needs help. There’s no one to help.” A reporter, a professional observer, breaks down describing a child left alone in front of what was her home. He reports through tears, “she sits there. She’s bandaged. She’s all alone.” The 7.0 earthquake, poorly constructed buildings, poverty, and political corruption killed more than 50,000 people. Mass graves are being dug. Those who survive are helpless to lift the heavy loads that have fallen where people are trapped. They look to the skies, waiting for the peoples of the world to come. We too wait.

We too wait. We wait for a world where homes and schools are built to keep our loved ones safe. We wait for those who govern to care more about their people than about their power. We wait for a world where everyone has enough, where clean water becomes abundant and medicine flows to those who have need.

Like those who are looking at masses of rubble too heavy to lift, feeling helpless to do what is needed, we look up to sky for help...help us O God.

What sign are we given in reply?

“I am thankful” spoke one Haitian, “I’m lucky. I’m alive.” He was not alone in his expression of thanksgiving.

“I thank my God...”

These words begin Paul’s letter to the Philippians, a letter he writes from prison, incarcerated for speaking about Jesus. Some say he wrote this letter as he faced his own pending execution.

I grew up knowing the story of the baseball player, Lou Gehrig, who stood inside a stadium full of people as his body was losing its power to hold onto life, who in his farewell speech said, “Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth.”

Gehrig’s statement was echoed by our beloved sister Cyndy. Her doctor, after 12 years of treating her, finally told her it was the end. Dr. Link was saying how unlucky she was. Guido tells us she started to shake her head in negation. She looked up, smiled, and said “Unlucky, no.

I’m the luckiest girl...to have had 12 years of life.”

They make clear our choice. Faced with difficulty, we can simply yell out at the heavens because of the injustice of it all or we can look up to God. When we do, over and over again, God leads us to begin our journeys, even, especially, the most painful ones, with thanksgiving.

Indeed, thanksgiving is not the end. If the colonists in 1775 were simply thankful for whatever small bit of grace they got each day, North America—and even the world—in 2010 might be very different. In Haiti, people grow desperate and gangs are forming. We know from experience, that any just order will be resisted. The enemy loves chaos. There is a fight to be fought there just as there are still battles to fight here.

When entering the battles of the world, the people of faith begin with the cry, “Help us O God.” It is a cry that depends on God for answer. It is the opening that allows Jesus in to lead us into a vision beyond the incarcerators of this world.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. writes telling of a week during the Birmingham battle for civil rights: “Somehow God gave me the power to transform the resentments, the suspicions, the fears and the misunderstanding I found that week into enthusiasm.”

Is it not enthusiasm we hear from Paul as he writes...“I thank my God every time I remember you....”

It is clear to me that God got involved with Paul as he waited in prison. God grants Paul the “occasion” to write to a church who loved him dearly. If Paul was afraid or in a foul mood because of what his present circumstance was, it changed the instant he started to write. The first thing to come out on the page when he tuned into God is thanksgiving for those he remembers.

In the same way Paul might remember how God led the people out of Egypt or Jesus with his disciples at the Last Supper, Paul remembers those to whom he ministered. His writing is a type of prayer. What comes out testifies to him of how God has been so very present in his life through them.

What comes out is altogether better than what Skype can show because it is God who is drawing the picture in Paul’s imagination. When God is at work you are much less likely to see the blemishes and instead see directly into the God shaped heart. When God is allowed to be

part of the picture, something new begins to appear—koinonia.

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with you for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

The word for sharing in Greek is koinonia. Koinonia is a rich word with no English equivalent. It is an identification with the other, compassion, empathy, living with. It is attunement, tuning in to God’s love for another.

In Christian life the gospel is the object of our sharing, of our fellowship, of our koinonia. Recall, the gospel for Paul is about the death and resurrection of Christ much more than his teachings. To share in the gospel is to share in the suffering and dying of Christ, to share in his resurrection, and out of that experience, to be reborn.

The celebration of the Lord’s Last Supper was as important to the early Christians as it is today. In Communion we gather with the disciples and share, with Jesus, his last meal. We are present with him, attuned to him and his disciples, in a time when they had heavy hearts. We remember together as the pastor holds up the elements says...”on the night of his arrest, Jesus took the bread and after giving Thanks.”

To share in the gospel together is more than feeling the guilt that Jesus died for you. Christianity is not an individual matter. Gospel Koinonia cannot be found in solitude. To share in the gospel is to share in each other’s lives, in the dying and rebirthing, the joy, the confidence of faith, the thanksgiving, the prayers, the meal. It is to share with Jesus in his ministry and love for all who are here.

It is gospel koinonia which reveals God’s transforming power. There is plenty of that here.

It was the occasion of seeing all of you walking with Cyndy that led me to this scripture. You walking with her, her walking with you. It was Gospel Koinonia. There was never any doubt about the reality that she faced. She would say about her cancer “it is what it is” and then move on to other matters, like whatever it was you most cared about. She wanted you close, even to the last, opening her home to all who wanted to come. And, you came. You stayed awake.

Something happened, didn’t it? It was clear to me that those who spent time with Cyndy would come back feeling happier than when they set off to go.

Gospel Koinonia isn’t just for the most mature Christians. It is how faith acts. Paul writes, “it is right for me to think of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment

and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

As it did for those who carried on after Paul, Gospel Koinonia gives us the strength to act when God calls. Having shared with Jesus in his death and resurrection, we know the limits of this world’s power. And we are willing to enter into the battle for the sake of one another, not knowing how it will turn out, simply knowing it is what Christ’s love working in us means us to do.

Martin Luther King Jr., faced with lack of money for bail and friends wanting him to remain outside of jail to help raise funds to free those who were, left a meeting and went into the next room. There he fought with the voices inside himself, the practicality of remaining free verses the call he felt to join those who, because of his words, were willing to go to jail. He emerged from the room and told his friends, “I don’t know what will happen. I don’t know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act.”

Gospel Koinonia, based in Christ, begun in thanksgiving, and forged through years of friendship, prepares us to act when God calls. Indeed Gospel Koinonia provides the evidence that gives us the strength to do that for which no human heart is fit. Through our sharing with others we can see God can go where we cannot.

The final movement within these few first verses of Paul’s letter is a letting go of those he loved. “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.” I see Paul sitting in a cell longing to be near them, to hold them once again in his sights, in his arms. Yet he knows he won’t be travelling to Philippi anymore. Our of this struggle, Paul writes one of the most memorable lines of his letters...

2:12...”My beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you...”

From our reading today 1: 6 “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

While there are plenty of images of the last days in scripture, Paul doesn’t draw on any of them here because they would distract from the Gospel Koinonia which gives strength for today. What Paul wants them to know is that God, eternal God, continues on and on and on. In this moment, we share not only in Paul’s imprisonment but in his handing off, his giving over, the people he loves to God’s care. Paul’s starting with them was a work of God...that they will continue on is the continuing work of God.

It is an extraordinary faith act to hand those you love over to God's care. If Paul is our example, it is something that only can be done in prayer.

In prayer Paul sees--in prayer Paul believes that the community's work, Christ's work in them, will go on. That which animated him, gave him strength and courage, that which sent him on 100 journeys....is alive...working through them.

Notice Paul isn't silently praying. He tells them of his prayer, his final example. He wants them to remember just who has been the source of his strength and his belief that the source does not stop flowing. There is more knowledge to be gained, more insight to be given. The day of Christ is not a threat. Paul purposely avoids the Daniel/Revelation imagery of the Day of the Lord. The day of Christ is instead a promise...the one who begun the work in you will continue on until he is quite done. There is more righteousness to plant, more goodness to grow, more glory to be revealed.

From Paul servant of Christ to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Corona del Mar...

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

My friends, look at Paul, look at Cyndy, look at Martin Luther King...look at yourselves...This is how faith acts.