

Apostles Anglican Church

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Worthy of the Gospel of Christ

(Jonah 3:10-4:11, Ps 145:14-21, Phil 1:21-27, Matt 20:1-16)

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27a).

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Introduction

I think it was the writer Robert Fulghum who told of his recurring nightmare. In it, he is standing in line for the final judgment, making his way slowly, person by person, to the pearly gates and to St. Peter for a verdict on his eternal destiny. Directly in front of Fulghum in the line is a tiny, stooped, old woman dressed in blue and white. When she finally makes it to the front of the line with Fulghum next up behind her, St. Peter looks down at her, shakes his head sadly and says, "I'm sorry, Mother Teresa, but you just should have done more. Next."

Perhaps I should have continued our focus on St. Matthew's Gospel this morning, but St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians kept attracting my attention. It was just one verse — one part of one verse, actually.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27a).

I know this much about lectio divina, about sacred reading. When a word speaks to you, you do well to pay attention.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27a).

For some reason, I thought about Fulghum's dream when I read these words of St. Paul, his imperative to his brothers and sisters in Philippi to let their manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. The linguistic image that St. Paul paints is that of a citizen living in such a way as to bring honor and glory to his people and nation. We Americans do not have the best reputation abroad; the description "Ugly Americans" was coined to describe the arrogance and thoughtlessness of many American tourists. We too often fail to live up to the highest ideals of our national creeds. St. Paul says, "Don't be Ugly Christians. Don't give Christ a bad name in the culture. Live up to the faith you profess."

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27a).

What does it look like, what does it entail, this manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ? There are many valid ways to answer that question. But, since it is St. Paul writing, it seems reasonable to take his own life as an answer. There are three characteristics in St. Paul's manner of life — Well, there are more than three, but

sermons are only allowed to have three points; more than that and people get fidgety. So, I have reduced it to three. — there are three characteristics, three commitments in St. Paul's life that are central to a manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ: conversion, vocation, and suffering.

Conversion

The conversion of Saul the Pharisee to St. Paul the Apostle, beginning on the road to Damascus, is to many people the archetype for all conversions: a great moment of in-breaking truth, a brilliant light illuminating the spiritual darkness, a radical disconnect between one manner of life and another. John Newton, slave trader turned Anglican priest, expressed it this way:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see (John Newton, *Amazing Grace*, Public Domain).

Do you see the radical nature of Newton's conversion: wretch to saved, lost to found; blind to seeing?

Was this also the nature of Saul's conversion — a radical disconnect from all that went before, a repudiation of one life and the embrace of another? Well, yes...and no. Saul was a good Jew before his conversion, and Paul was a good Jew after. Saul was zealous before his conversion, and Paul was just as zealous — less the violent aspect of zeal — after. Saul was a man with a mission before his conversion, and Paul was a man with a mission after. Post-conversion Paul bore a great resemblance to pre-conversion Saul. So, what did change? Just this: Saul had no place in his life for Jesus; Paul had no life in himself apart from Jesus. Saul's great conversion was to Jesus as Lord. And *that* is a profound disconnect. The central conviction of Saul's life, his core belief, was the great creed of Israel, the Shema:

4 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4).

And Saul the Pharisee could see no place for Jesus in this confession. But, after his conversion, after encountering the resurrected Jesus in his vision on the way to Damascus, Paul the Apostle saw Jesus right at the heart of that confession. Listen to how he reinterprets the Shema in his letter to the Corinthians:

5 For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— **6** yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1 Cor 8:5-6).

And that is the nature of Saul's conversion: to see Jesus at the center of all things, to see Jesus as the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. That means conversion. That means placing Jesus at the center of all things. That may mean parting with all lesser pearls for the sake of one pearl of great price. Again, St. Paul, this time in writing to the Philippians:

4 If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:
5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; **6** as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. **7** But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil 5:4b-9).

That is conversion: the complete reorientation of oneself toward Jesus. My experience — the experience of the Church — is that such conversion is not one-and-done, not accomplished in an instant — but rather is a lifelong process. It is, as the Benedictine vow expresses it, a *conversatio morum*, a conversion of life to the end of one's days.

Put a weight on a string and spin it overhead in a circle. At each point in its path the weight seeks to fly off in a straight line tangent to the circle and away from the circle's center. It is only the constant tug of the string that keeps the weight in its proper orbit. That is a picture of conversion: Christ at the center, man circling but always seeking to fly off tangentially, and the tug of the "string" always pulling man back toward the center. What is the string? The Holy Spirit? Yes, certainly. Faith? Yes. The Church which offers the Word of God and the Sacraments? Yes. The spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting and almsgiving? Yes. The cultivation of the virtues, especially the virtues of faith, hope and love? Yes. Repentance and confession? Yes. The string of conversion is rope of many cords.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. This is a call to conversion.

Vocation

A man goes to the doctor to receive some potentially serious test results. The doctor enters the exam room, double checks the chart, smiles and says, "No need to worry. Everything came back normal. It seems you have many good years ahead of you."

The man looks pensive, shakes his head slowly and says, "Well, don't worry about it Doc; it's not your fault. You've done your best."

The doctor, now a bit flustered, says, “I don’t think you understand. You’re fine — perfectly healthy.”

“No, I get it,” the man says. “I was just sort of hoping that this was my time. I’m ready to go be with the Lord. That’s far better than living a long life here. But, if that’s not God’s will, I’ll accept it and get back to work. There is much to be done for the kingdom, you know.”

Can you imagine a conversation like that? St. Paul did not have to imagine it, nor do we. He was writing to the Philippians from prison, awaiting a verdict that might well mean his execution. He says:

19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, **20** as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. **21** For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. **22** If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. **23** I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. **24** But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. **25** Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, **26** so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again (Phil 1:19-26).

St. Paul tells the Philippians that they have just prayed too well for his deliverance and that the Lord has granted it. And, while he would rather depart to be with the Lord, Paul accepts that it is not yet his time, that, instead, he has fruitful labor yet to do for the sake of the kingdom and its people.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. For St. Paul, that means vocation. It means going out into the world to do the work he had been given to do, to love and serve the Lord with thankful heart, not only with his lips but in his life.

“Well, that’s alright for St. Paul; he was an Apostle. But, I don’t have a vocation,” you may be thinking. “I’m just a [fill in the blank].” Not so. Every person baptized into Christ Jesus — no exceptions — has a vocation by virtue of baptism. While there are many ways to describe that vocation, here at Apostles you will often hear this: every baptized believer has the threefold vocation of priest, prophet, and king.

As priests, you are to bless, to sanctify, to make holy every hard moment, every dark place into which the Spirit leads you: by your presence, by your prayers, by your sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, by your entering into the pain of the world with lament and hope and a cry for godly justice.

As prophets, you are to capture and cultivate God's vision for God's world and then to proclaim it in word and deed in every way possible. You are to be a living answer to the question: What would it look like if God were in charge here and now? You may be called to speak God's truth — Jesus is Lord! — to the dark powers who still think and act as if they run this world, as if it is theirs. You may be called to show love to those whom this dark world has cast aside: the poor, the widows, the orphans, the refugees, the prisoners, the powerless, the mocked, the lonely, the forgotten, the dregs of society disdained by the rich, the powerful, the prideful.

As kings, you are to bring order and justice to those shadowy places where chaos and injustice abound. But not as the rulers of this world do: through intimidation and violence, through power and privilege, through ill-gotten money and the influence it purchases. No. Your model is the King who welcomed tax collectors and sinners, who knelt to wash feet, who reigned from a cross, who said to his disciples:

25 “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. **26** It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, **28** even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:25b-28).

You have this vocation by virtue of your baptism: priest, prophet, king. And you also have lives: family, school, job, retirement. So, the question becomes: How do I exercise my baptismal vocation as priest, prophet, and king in my life as mother or teacher or scientist or plumber or manager or artist or administrator or retiree or caregiver or [fill in the blank of your own circumstances]? Only be certain of this: that you can and that it is God's will that you do. There is no state of life in which you cannot offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. There is no circumstance in which you cannot promote order and champion justice. There is no place where you cannot serve.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. This is a call to vocation.

Suffering

St. Paul specifically mentions one other characteristic of the manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ. These are his words.

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, **28** and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. **29** For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, **30** engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (Phil 1:27-30).

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. This is a call to suffering.

It is true to say that Christ died *for* us: true, provided we understand that “for” does not mean “instead of.” If Christ tarries, I will experience bodily death, as he did, as you will. To say that Christ died for us means that we now die in him, that our death is now united to his death, so that his victory over death becomes our victory over death. We will all die, but it has been granted to us to die in Christ.

It is true to say that Christ suffered for us: true, provided we understand that “for” does not mean “instead of.” To live at all is to suffer. The Buddhists are wrong about this: suffering is not illusion. It is real and we all must experience it sooner or later. But we — those who are in Christ Jesus — have been uniquely given the grace of suffering for him, with him, and in him. And that makes all the difference.

There is great mystery here; we are at the limits of understanding and language. But of this I am certain, though I have no good words to explain it or to persuade you. Just as Jesus’ own suffering was redemptive — brought life and reconciliation to the world — so our suffering for his sake, our suffering united with his, our suffering offered up to him, partakes of that redemption, becomes part of his redemptive work for the world. Surely, St. Paul had something like this in mind when he wrote this to the Colossians:

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church (Col 1:24).

When Christ cried out on the cross, “It is finished!” he meant that *his* work was finished, not that the kingdom work was complete, not that there was nothing left to do. Just fifty days later, he poured out his Spirit upon his people at Pentecost to empower them for the gospel work left to do, for the gospel work he left them — and us — to do. And St. Paul insists that part of that gospel work is suffering for the sake of Christ, and that we should count that suffering as gift. Suffering, when united to Christ’s suffering, is purifying and perfecting; even Christ himself was made perfect through suffering (see Heb 2:10).

St. Paul does not call us to be masochists, to seek out unnecessary suffering. But, he does call us not to fear it. He calls us see it for what it is, to accept it for what it is or what it can be: an expression of God’s great love for us and for the world, a means of purification and witness, a gift that unites us to Christ.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. This is a call to suffering.

Conclusion

I don’t think the final judgment will look much like Fulghum’s nightmare. But, if it does, I hope I am behind *him* in line and not behind Mother Teresa. A bit of buffer would be nice. Until that time comes though, we know our calling; St. Paul has made it clear.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. That is a call to conversion, to vocation, to suffering. **Amen.**