

Homily Sept 13.15 Message Series begins: a life worth living> Jesus gives us a new heart

Pray

A pill that can add ten years to your life will be ready, researchers say, in ten years (June 26, 2015). Apart from the skepticism we have about such medical promises, as Nigel Hawkes, from The Times of London asks, “will a prolonged life, be a life worth living?”

For St Paul, who did not see prolonging human life as a goal, it was Jesus Christ who made life profoundly worth living. In his letter to the Philippians Paul states directly and indirectly that life is indeed worth living for a whole host of reasons, not only for him but for his readers as well. In this new message series we will explore some of those reasons, how faith in Christ can make life worth living for us today.

The message series will be augmented by small group bible studies on Paul’s letter to the Philippians called A Life Worth Living. We’ll offer those study groups Wed mornings and Thursday evenings. If you are interested in finding out more about the Life Worth Living study group, there is/ or will be/ a sign up sheet in the foyer or you can email me kitgreaves@icloud.com for more information.

Let’s set Paul’s letter to the Philippians geographically and historically: a strategic place in the world, now a ruin in north-eastern Greece, the city of Philippi was an important city of commerce and culture situated between two mountain ranges, separating Europe and Asia. Named after Alexander the Great’s father Philip, who sought to control the silver and gold mines there, the Lord opened to Paul this church plant because of the possibilities it held for people spreading the good news. Christians finds themselves in a strategic place too, to share God’s love in Jesus, in words and actions, that others might come to know healing and restoration, confidence and joy.

As we imagined with the children this morning, the first people who came to believe in Jesus in Philippi were representative of all classes of society: Lydia, a successful business woman, a slave girl freed from her captors, and a middle-class jailer and his family. Sharing faith in one’s household became a normative part of life of the early church and our life too. I’m thankful for a faithful family growing up.

Paul’s purpose in writing the letter was to encourage the leadership and all believers in Philippi and to share the warmth and joy – a word used 16 times in the letter- that a follower of Jesus knows, as part of a church family.

So the place, the people, and the purpose of the letter to the Philippians indicate there are treasures of great worth to explore.

Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

Have you really thought about that question? Who do you say I am? Not just intellectually but for you personally.

You could answer in terms of what God has done for you, the family and home God has helped make possible, but that answer misses the who I am, which is a question of his being, and his character.

When I was praying about this, I had an overwhelming sense that Paul in his letter to the Philippians is already helping us with an answer. It's right there in the introduction to the letter, which we could easily miss.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with the bishops and deacons – they had more than one bishop as we do in the Diocese of Toronto – we have five bishops and Linda is our Trent-Durham Area bishop. Then, don't miss this- Paul offers his opening

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

Grace –charis in Greek – steadfast loving kindness, in Hebrew 'Hesed' – is from God

Peace – shalom – is from God.

If you've ever wondered how to answer the question, Who do you say I am , you might consider these words in a prayer; God, you are the one who gives grace. You are grace. You are peace. God is holy and completely other than us, but God's character of grace, is there when we come to him, who listens to our heart and knows whatever emotional, physical or financial state we are in, God ministers to the heart and mind from his throne of grace. Who do you say I am, I say you are a God of grace and I need you, O I need you, my precious God I need thee. O leave me not my saviour but come to me. I say you are my God, my saviour, my friend, my Jesus. Thank you a thousand times and more.

Peace, Shalom the Hebrew word means so much. Shalom is God's nature. Shalom is who God is. Jesus goes to the cross to bring peace to those who were far off and peace to those are near, rather than fight the human battle against his oppressors because he kept his eyes on the prize, aware of his combatant the evil one, but his eye was on us. Hebrews 12.2 says fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him – that's us - he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We are Jesus' joy.

In Ann Patchett's book, Bel Canto, the main character Roxanne says, "People love each other for all sorts of reasons...Most of the time we're loved for what we can do rather than for who we are. It's not such a bad thing, being loved for what you can do."

Jesus did not display a 'saviour complex', an unhealthy obsession over solving others' problems. He had no compulsion to convert the entire world in his lifetime or cure people who were not ready to be cured. I never sense Jesus twisting a

person's arm. Rather, he stated the consequences of a choice, then threw the decision back to the other party. Who do you say I am?

In short, Jesus showed an incredible respect for human freedom. As writer Elton Trueblood has observed (quoted by P. Yancey Grace Notes Pg 61), the major symbols of invitation that Jesus used had a severe, even offensive quality: the yoke of burden, the cup of suffering, the towel of servanthood. "Take up your cross and follow me," Jesus said, is the least manipulative invitation that has ever been given.

Life is worth living because God gives us his heart of grace and peace, a new heart, a heart transplant if you will, that Jesus' death and resurrection make possible. Its not coerced but invited. It's offered.

Nicky Gumbel tells the story about a friend of his named Kerry Dixon, who went to the Philippines with a team to work alongside the Christians there. One day, he and his team went to speak to an isolated tribe called the T'boli at Lake Sebu. This involved walking for several hours through rough terrain and mountain tracks over paddy fields and plantations. They took with them two translators: a Filipino pastor to translate English into Cebuano and a T'boli member to translate from Cebuano into his own language. At about 8 pm after night fall, word spread that the 'white people' had appeared. The tribe emerged from the darkness to gather by the light of flaming torches. Kerry spoke about Jesus through the two interpreters to this group of people who had never heard about Jesus. After that they pushed forward a middle-aged man, blind from birth who as well-known and respected throughout the village. If Jesus was God they wanted to him in action.

In the hushed silence, Kerry laid hands on the man and prayed for Jesus to heal him. He then asked if the man could see. The man replied through interpreters that he could see flickering lights through the darkness. After Kerry prayed a second time, he could make out Kerry's outline in front of him. The third time Kerry prayed, there was no need for any interpretation – the man was jumping for joy and praising the living God, who had performed a miracle before their eyes. All fifty people present that night were converted and a new church was begun. The church is still growing.

The church at Philippi like the church of T'Bohie was founded by an extraordinary display of God's power. The endeavour began in frustration. Paul could not go to Asia or Bithynia. Every door appeared shut, but as so often happens when circumstances seem against us, God opened up something much better. In a vision, Paul saw a man saying: "Come over to Macedonia and help us (Acts 16:9). On the first Saturday that he was there, he went down to the river where there was a group of women praying. (They had probably gathered there because Philippi did not have the necessary 10 Jewish men to form a synagogue). As Paul spoke about Jesus, Lydian, a rich merchant woman, was converted and persuaded Paul to stay at her home.

While he was there Paul was followed around town by a fortune-teller, who was clearly under demonic influence as a result of her involvement in the occult and who kept saying: "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the

way to be saved”(Acts 16:17). Finally, after several days of this, Paul could take her endless repetitions no longer and turned around and said, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her!” (Acts 16:18). At that moment the evil spirit came out. The woman was a slave and her owners were furious that she had lost her supernatural powers. They seized Paul and Silas and handed them over to the authorities in Philippi. They whipped up the crowd against the two men. The magistrates bowed to the pressure and ordered that Paul and Silas be stripped, severely flogged and thrown into prison.

In prison with their feet in stocks, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God. They had seen God’s power to change the direction of Lydia’s life and to bring her whole family to faith. They had seen God’s power in setting freed a young slave woman afflicted by an evil spirit. Now they saw God’s power at work in another miraculous way: an earthquake shook the prison and every door flew open. The prison officer in charge was about to commit suicide because he thought all the prisoners had escaped and he feared the consequences. Faced with freedom, Paul chose instead to stay and to bring his jailer to Christ. When Paul assured him that the prisoners were all still there he asked: “What must I do to be saved?” Paul explained what the prison officer had to do and thus he and later his whole family came to Christ and were baptized.

These events were so clearly supernatural that Paul saw the astonishing power of God behind the human agency of his words. It was God’s power that started the church at Philippi; there Paul could have supreme confidence that God would complete what he had begun. This is the confidence we have if we are Christians: we have responded to God’s call and God has begun a good work in us...

New heart, even when life is difficult.. a Christian may lose a job, money, liberty, or even life, but never eternal life. Jesus added, “no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28)

New heart of confidence, of compassion vs 7, 8

New heart of concern for others to grow in love, in knowledge, in holiness

Stewart Ball story –only God could make a heart new. Stewart Ball was a former parishioner of St John’s who opposed changes we were making 11 years ago, from use of the 1959 Book of Common Prayer to 1985 Book of Alternative Services at the main Sunday Service. He complained to me about the changes and he and his wife left our church along with others. Ten years later, both Stewart and I were serving on Diocesan Council and he asked after one of the monthly meetings if I could give him a lift home to Whitby. In our conversations over a few months, he told me that in the last three years of his life, he discovered God not only is alive, answers prayers but that the Holy Spirit has been with him his entire life but he just hadn’t seen Him! Now he is a mentor with EFM, Education for Ministry at his church All Saints Whitby and a regular member, with his grandson of an international, ecumenical, charismatic bible study group and completely understands the changes. God is so good that he gave Stewart the desire to speak again back here at St. John’s a few weeks ago, recognizing the role of God in a new life worth living as a 70 + year old man. A life worth living!

Next week a new purpose